

“TAMING THE INTRACTABLE”: CHINESE MIGRANTS, INTER-ASIAN  
INTERACTIONS, AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF FRENCH RULE IN COLONIAL  
VIETNAM, 1862-1940

By

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## ABSTRACT

### “TAMING THE INTRACTABLE”: CHINESE MIGRANTS, INTER-ASIAN INTERACTIONS, AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF FRENCH RULE IN COLONIAL VIETNAM, 1862-1940

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This dissertation explores the migration, settlement, and evolution of the Chinese communities—a largely forgotten diaspora—and their importance in the transformation of French colonial Vietnam. Drawing on three years of transnational archival research spanning Vietnam, China and Singapore in a variety of Vietnamese, Chinese, French, and English sources, I construct the first comprehensive social and political history of Chinese commercial networks, social organizations, and cultural institutions; their multi-level interactions with the French colonial regime and Vietnamese; and their relations to mobile communities in maritime Southeast Asia and a China in the middle of drastic political transformations. Focusing on four crucial sites of ethnic Chinese-colonial state interactions, notably the colonial rice trade, health and cultural institutions, immigration surveillance, and crime and informal economies, my dissertation resituates the Chinese in Vietnam at the center of a prominent Nanyang diasporic network connecting East and Southeast Asia by examining Chinese transnationalism and identities as evolving and flexible articulations that responded dialogically to French colonial control, to the gravity of the Chinese Revolution and nationalist movements, and to varying modes of interactions with the wider Chinese capital and migratory connections in Hong Kong and Singapore.

The dissertation is organized into four main chapters, thematically and chronologically organized to highlight the evolution of Chinese identities, mobile practices, and relationships to colonialism against dominant narratives of modern Vietnamese history that tend to privilege

revolutionary times and downplay inter-ethnic elements. Chapter 1 explores Chinese rice monopoly and the political struggles between transnational rice merchants, a hyper-regulatory colonial state, and a new generation of Francophile Vietnamese politicians who advocated anti-Chinese nationalism as the answer to Chinese “domination.” Chapter 2 focuses on Chinese participation in the global opium trade, gambling *cercles*, and inter-Asian relationships that fostered an informal economy while challenging the foundation of colonial legal structures, leading to Vietnamese contentious attitudes towards Chinese roles in the French civilizing mission. Chapter 3 investigates the establishment, bureaucratization, and innovation of the French service of immigration control seeking to police increasingly mobile Chinese economic, social, and “illicit” networks and Chinese deployment of flexible identities to resist colonial hegemonic regulations. And chapter 4 turns to examine the local and transnational tensions of ethnic co-existence between mobile Chinese communities and the colonial state as reflected in issues of Franco-Chinese education, repatriations of Chinese remains to Hong Kong and their hometowns, and Chinese-led hospitals and their interactions with colonial medical institutions.

My dissertation advances four interrelated areas of studies: Chinese migrants in Vietnam in the history of Nanyang Chinese migration wherein Vietnam’s crucial Chinese communities have remained largely marginal; the studies of the Sinosphere and Chinese identities; Sino-European relations and postcolonialism; and the history of colonial and modern Vietnam at large. By destabilizing Chinese-ness through an examination of diasporic identities under French rule and their multiple manifestations, my dissertation gives southern Vietnam and its Chinese communities their rightful places in the broader history of global empires, Chinese migration, and Greater China.

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*For my dear parents and grandparents, whose unceasing love and support mean the world*

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This project has been a long time in the making. I first stumbled on the topic of Chinese migrants in Vietnam while preparing for a research paper in Kristin Stapleton's seminar on international history at the University at Buffalo. I distinctly remembered sifting through pages of the digitized diplomatic archives at the Wilson Center to make sense of the plights of "overseas Chinese" who left Vietnam on the eve of the 1979 Border War and ended up writing a paper which argued that asymmetrical "diasporic diplomacy" was one of a key contested theater of the Third Indochina War. Never would I have imagined that this topic has since persistently stuck with me through my doctoral training not only because I strive to go back further in time to understand the intriguing histories of an oft-forgotten "diasporic" community in colonial Vietnam but also because I have come to then realize the crucial roles they played in colonial politics and in shaping Vietnam's complex postcolonial present.

Throughout these arduous years of research and writing, I have received generous supports from advisers, professors, peers, and multiple institutions in the United States, Vietnam, China, and Singapore. I must begin by thanking my advisor, Charles Keith, who has been a major source of inspiration and a role model during my training at MSU. Over the course of my study, Charles has been the best advisor one can ever ask for. His expertise in modern French colonialism and Vietnamese history, tireless support of his student's intellectual endeavors, and unparalleled work ethics taught me how to become a better scholar and teacher. His timely, constructive, and "razor-sharp" feedback has been crucial to the formulations, revisions, and realization of this project. In my hardest and busiest of time, Charles has routinely provided any supports I need—oftentimes even without me asking—whether checking on me regularly while I was researching overseas,

submitting numerous fellowship, grants, and job letters, or just simply making sure that I navigated through the unnerving travails of graduate work effectively. Above all, I want to thank him for being a caring mentor and a good friend.

I have the good fortune to learn the crafts of history under the guidance of an exceptionally supportive and highly engaging dissertation committee. Mindy Smith trained me in Modern Chinese history, taught me how to think like a social historian, and encouraged me to look into diverse source bases beyond the confine of administrative archives. Our endless conversations about the many aspects of academia and research, always filled with humor and positivity, inspired me and kept me motivated through graduate school. I find myself extremely lucky to be able not only to take a few memorable seminars with a giant in the field of Soviet history—Dr. Lewis Siegelbaum—before his retirement in 2018 but also to ask him to be a part of my comprehensive exam and doctoral committee. Dr. Siegelbaum shows me how to be a critical reader of scholarship and to maintain a rigorous standard of historical analyses. His holistic knowledge of migration and economic history and expertise in global communism equipped me with crucial theoretical tools to approach my own project. Haydon Cherry at Northwestern University took the time out of his hectic schedule to be an outside reader of this dissertation. I can't thank him enough for reading my chapters thoroughly and providing thoughtful and in-depth comments. I am also grateful to him for giving me much-needed archival research advice and sharing his on-the-ground experiences before I embarked upon a year-long trip to Ho Chi Minh City in 2019.

Joining the department of history at Michigan State University was one of the best decisions I have made in my career. I reserve my first order of gratitude to Michael Stamm and Karrin Hanshew whose tenures as the department's Directors of Graduate Studies overlapped with my time as a graduate student. Both Michael and Karrin had always been the biggest advocates of my

work and provided all kinds of support and facilitation possible—be they in writing travel letters, nominating me for funding and awards, or preparing me for the job market. I could not imagine surviving graduate school without their precious helps and advice on multiple occasions. Elyse Hansen and Jennifer Desloover deserve special thanks for their tireless multi-year assistance with my paperwork and the necessary administrative processes allowing me to go on research leaves and to complete my doctoral requirements without worries.

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## KEY TO ABBREVIATIONS

BNF—National Library of France

CLB—The Opinion (Công Luận Báo)

DRV—Democratic Republic of Vietnam

GMD—Guomindang

GOUCOCH—Fonds du Gouverneur de la Cochinchine

KMT—Kuomintang

LTTV—Gazetteer of the Six Southern Provinces (Lục Tỉnh Tân Văn)

NKKTB—Southern Economic Journal (Nam Kỳ Kinh Tế Báo)

NLB—National Library Board

NAS—National Archive of Singapore

PRC—People's Republic of China

ROC—Republic of China

RVN—Republic of Vietnam

STCNK—Southern Ministry of Commerce (Sở Thương Chánh Nam Kỳ]

TTLTQG-II—Vietnam National Archive Center II, Ho Chi Minh City

TVQGVN—National Library of Vietnam

## **INTRODUCTION**

On May 24, 1909, Phước Di Hưng, a Teochew Chinese in Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn, then the capital of French Cochinchina (modern-day southern Vietnam), notified the French municipal police chief of a suspicious Chinese fugitive named Lai Keeng Chen, accusing him of “sowing disorder” in the colony and engaging in anti-French activities. Later tracked down and captured by the French police after a prolonged search, 40-year-old Lai Keeng Chen revealed his true identity as a Hakka Chinese based in Singapore who was also the agent of a secret society there. Lai also made a striking confession: he had used, on multiple occasions, a fake passport to successfully infiltrate French customs. Testimonies from Chinese leaders further indicated that Lai Keeng Chen had begun to organize secret meetings, raise funds from wealthy merchants for nationalist causes, and distribute anti-Qing pamphlets from Singapore to traders in Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn. Colonial intelligence reported that he partially achieved this goal by implicating the chief of the Cantonese clan in what was described as a “transnational riot link” evidenced by the financial support he received from said congregation. This incident, among many other moments of chaos that involved foreign Chinese “illegal” activities in that year, intensified French anxieties over their ability to police Chinese movements as well as their interregional networks, and instigated a new era of stringent immigration reforms in the subsequent periods. Characterized by French colonists as “intractable” political subjects, Chinese migrants in Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn were to be embroiled in contentious inter-ethnic encounters that soon transformed colonial politics and reshaped communities’ relations to their French “colonial master.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Gouvernement de la Cochinchine (GOUCOCH) L.13 N5555, *Dossier Relatif à la Création d’une Chambre de Commerce Chinois à Chợ Lớn Années 1909-1910* [Files Relating to the Creation of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce in Chợ Lớn, 1909-1910], Vietnam National Archive Center II (Hereafter TTLTQG-II), Ho Chi Minh City.

Such a relationship and its evolution along a broad historical trajectory from the dawn of the colonial conquest of French Cochinchina to the height of revolutionary nationalism leading toward Vietnamese independence from French rule in the 1940s are the primary focuses of this dissertation. Chinese migrants formed a historic co-existing community that remained central to national history and our knowledge of its various enduring processes including colonization, capitalist modernity, revolution, and nation-building. Yet, they have remained, at best, on the periphery of standard nationalist historiography, only to be mentioned in all-too-common phraseology of ethnic unification and celebration of an independent nation-state. At worst, they suffered from a double occlusion, in colonial ethnographic discourses and postcolonial Vietnamese writings, that downplayed their contributions.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, historians writing about Chinese migration in Vietnam, while rightly acknowledging on some level the crucial Chinese presence, tend to analyze Chinese institutions in essentialized manners: as purely “commercial”, economically dominant communities, as mere subservient agents and “collaborators of empire”, and as politically and unconditionally loyal to the Chinese homeland. The emergence of new research in Vietnamese urban histories focusing on Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn has begun to distill and combat these issues, but the dominant land-locked and nation-centric approaches that rendered invisible the transnational forces shaping southern Vietnam are still a force to be reckoned with and to be further dismantled.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Patricia Pelley, “‘Barbarians’ and ‘Younger Brothers’: The Remaking of Race in Postcolonial Vietnam,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 29, no. 2 (1998): 374–91.

<sup>3</sup> For example, see Tracy C. Barrett, *The Chinese Diaspora in South-East Asia: The Overseas Chinese in Indo-China*, Library of Modern China Studies (London ; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2012); Haydon Cherry, *Down and Out in Sài Gòn: Stories of the Poor in a Colonial City* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019); Philippe Peycam, “From the Social to the Political: 1920s Colonial Sài Gòn as a ‘Space of Possibilities’ in Vietnamese Consciousness,” *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 21, no. 3 (September 15, 2013): 496–546; Mei Feng Mok, *Negotiating Community and Nation in Chợ Lớn: Nation-Building, Community-Building and Transnationalism in Everyday Life during the Republic of Việt Nam, 1955-1975*, Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Washington, 2016; César Ducruet, “Asian Cities in the Global Maritime Networks Since the Late Nineteenth

My multi-sited research in Vietnam, Singapore, and China in colonial administrative archives and understudied materials including administrative and legal documents, periodicals, travelogues, newspapers and magazines, memoirs, gazetteers, and local history chronicles reveals an intriguing yet underexplored narrative of mobility, globalization, and interconnectedness that brings attention to the significance of reexamining key domains of interactions between Chinese migrant communities, French colonists, and Vietnamese. In investigating this “field of interaction”, I was captivated by the multi-level layers of networks that helps shed further light on the relationship between colonialism and Chinese migrants as mobile and transnational communities.<sup>4</sup> As such, this dissertation seeks to answer the following core questions: (1) How did Chinese migrants and their transnational economic, social, and political networks interact with French colonial policies? (2) How did the evolution, migration, and settlement of Chinese communities define the landscape of inter-ethnic relations in Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn? (3) how did these networks forged by migrant communities complicate, challenge, and ultimately reshape colonial governance across times and spaces? Which forms of inter-Asian connections (or disconnections) did these networks generate and what were their implications? (4) How did Chinese diasporic identities emerge, coalesce, and transform as communities navigated the ruptures in colonial and transnational politics in the long twentieth century? And finally, (5) which insights can we learn from the colonial period that helps explain why Chinese communities become the targets of racial

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Century," in Gregory Bracken, ed., *Asian Cities: Colonial to Global* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015), pp. 173-186; Pierre Barreton et al., *Cities of Nineteenth Century Colonial Vietnam: Hà Nội, Sài Gòn, Hue and the Champa Ruins* (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> I draw this notion of “field of interactions” from Pierre Bourdieu’s influential concept of the “social fields” which theorizes how the social world is constituted by relational spaces, each remaining “an autonomous domain of activity that responds to rules of functioning and institutions that are specific to it and which defines the relations among the agents.” See Mathieu Hilgers and Eric Mangez, eds., *Bourdieu’s Theory of Social Fields: Concepts and Applications*, First edition, Routledge Advances in Sociology 128 (London New York: Routledge, 2015), p. 5.

antagonism in the post-war disintegration of the colonial state and the rise of national governments in Vietnam?

This dissertation reframes Chinese communities in Vietnam as one of the key actors—or co-participants—in a Nanyang Chinese Sinophone world spanning southern China and colonial Southeast Asia, constituting a part of what cultural anthropologist Engseng Ho theoretically terms “inter-Asian societies.”<sup>5</sup> Foregrounding the port cities of Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn as an epicenter of two converging historical forces in modern Vietnam, Chinese migration and French colonization, I argue that the formation and adaptation of Chinese commercial, cultural, and political networks, and diasporic relations within and beyond Vietnam, were central to major transformations of French colonial governance in Cochinchina by the late nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century. Unlike previous studies that neglect inter-ethnic dimensions and focus solely on the colonial perspectives, I treat Chinese networks and identities as an evolving and flexible articulation that responded dialogically to French colonial control, to the gravity of the Chinese Revolution and nationalist movements, and to varying modes of interactions with the wider Nanyang Chinese connections in Hong Kong and Singapore. In so doing, I place an emphasis on how migrants navigated and interacted with French colonial institutions and inter-Asian forces through what I call four crucial sites of colonial state-ethnic Chinese encounters: the colonial rice trade, health and cultural institutions, immigration surveillance, and crime and informal economy. This dissertation thus further contends that without repositioning Chinese migrants in Vietnam at the center of a larger Southeast Asian (*Nanyang*) Chinese diasporic network, we produce an incomplete account of not only the historical roles that they played in the making of colonial

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<sup>5</sup> Engseng Ho, “Inter-Asian Concepts for Mobile Societies,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 76, no. 4 (November 2017): 907–28.

politics and Vietnamese nation-building, but also their contested places in Vietnam and Southeast Asia today.

Before I proceed to an analysis of the dissertation's theoretical interventions, the next section will provide a brief historical sketch of Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn's Chinese communities and their contour of development in light of the late-nineteenth century colonial modernization that transformed the twin cities into a cosmopolitan commercial metropolis.

### **Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn: From Chinese Frontiers to Colonial Cities**

Chinese migration to Vietnam and participation in its economy were protracted age-old phenomena marked by centuries-long Sino-Vietnamese interactions, conflicts, and state-building.<sup>6</sup> In southern Vietnam, the first massive wave of Chinese migrants to occupy the region came at the fall of the Ming dynasty in 1644 when groups of Ming loyalists escaped from the persecution of the Manchu-ruled Qing dynasty and settled down in coastal areas of modern-day Vietnam, including Hội An, Qui Nhơn, Sài Gòn, and Hà Tiên. Under the Nguyễn Lord's relatively more open attitude toward refugees' integration and commercial trade, the Chinese population in the south grew quickly with a rough estimation of 4000-5000 people in Hội An by 1642 and a total of

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<sup>6</sup> A rich body of scholarship on precolonial Vietnam has documented earlier waves of Chinese migration and settlement in the polity that would soon become Vietnam. See, for example, John K. Whitmore, "Ngo (Chinese) Communities and Montane-Littoral Conflict in Dai Viet, ca. 1400-1600," *Asia Major* 27, no. 2 (2014): 53-85; Alexander Woodside, *Vietnam and the Chinese Model: A Comparative Study of Vietnamese and Chinese Government in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century*, Harvard East Asian Monographs 140 (Cambridge, Mass: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University : Distributed by Harvard University Press, 1988); Charles Wheeler, "Re-Thinking the Sea in Vietnamese History: Littoral Society in the Integration of Thuận-Quảng, Seventeenth-Eighteenth Centuries," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 37, no. 1 (2006): 123-53; Choi Byung Wook, *Southern Vietnam under the Reign of Minh Mạng (1820-1841): Central Policies and Local Response*, Southeast Asia Program Series, no. 20 (Ithaca, N.Y: Southeast Asia Program Publications, Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 2004); Tana Li, *Nguyễn Cochinchina: Southern Vietnam in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, Studies on Southeast Asia, no. 23 (Ithaca, N.Y: Southeast Asia Program Publications, 1998); Keith Weller Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Brian A. Zottoli, "Reconceptualizing Southern Vietnamese History from the 15th to 18th Centuries: Competition along the Coasts from Guangdong to Cambodia" (Ph.D., United States -- Michigan, University of Michigan, 2011).

30,000-40,000 in southern Vietnam toward the end of the eighteenth century.<sup>7</sup> After the Tây Sơn army's decisive victory over the Trịnh Lord that unified the two previously opposed polities and the subsequent takeover of Quang Trung's force in 1802, emperor Nguyễn Ánh, recognizing the potentials and contributions of Chinese migrants to the local economy, allowed them to be registered as permanent settlers as opposed to itinerant merchants or sojourners. All Chinese being granted permanent residency up to this period were collectively referred to by the Sino-Vietnamese term *Minh Hương* (*Ming Xiang* 明鄉 in Chinese, which literally means Ming-incensed villages as a token of remembrance to their ancestry as descendants of Ming refugees).

As the Nguyễn polity expanded its territories southward, incomplete settlements and untapped economic potential in the Mekong Delta presented numerous opportunities for Chinese frontier cultivation. This process had long been an extensive imperial project in the making since 1679 when the arrival of 3000 Chinese troupes led by two anti-Qing military generals Trần Thượng Xuyên and Dương Ngạn Địch at the central-Vietnamese port of Tourane overlapped with Nguyễn Hoàng's near-complete acquisition of the Southeastern and Western Transbassac.<sup>8</sup> When the two generals pled loyalty to the Nguyễn lord and asked for permission to take refuge in southern Vietnam, they were welcomed with open arms given the strategic position of Cochinchina in a flourishing maritime networks of commerce and the Sino-Japanese-Vietnamese alliances with which the Nguyễn clan harnessed its power. Soon after in the early eighteenth century, as the scholar-official Trịnh Hoài Đức elaborately documented in his classic *Gia Định Thành Thông Chí* (Unified Gazetteer of the Gia Định Citadel), another general-in-exile Cantonese Chinese named

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<sup>7</sup> Li Tana, "The Chinese in Vietnam" in Lynn Pan and Chinese Heritage Center (Singapore), eds., *The Encyclopedia of the Chinese Overseas* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1999).

<sup>8</sup> Lê Thị Vỹ Phương, "Người Minh Hương, Dấu Ấn Di Dân và Việt Hóa Qua Một Số Tư Liệu Hán Nôm [Minh Hương, A History of Immigration and Vietnamization through Selected Sino-Vietnamese Documentations]" *Tạp Chí Khoa Học Xã Hội* [Journal of Social Science Research], No 7 (179: 2013), pp. 66-67.



Mạc Cửu aided Nguyễn Hoàng's imperial ambition through the conquest of Hà Tiên as a key southernmost coastal town at the expense of Cambodia, turning it into a prosperous and profitable Chinese "colony."<sup>9</sup> Undoubtedly, well before the tumultuousness of the Tây Sơn Uprising, Ming loyalist Chinese in Cochinchina, then fully incorporated into the sphere of southern Vietnamese imperial politics, had established their prominent positions and identities ubiquitously as powerful merchants, mariners, court officials, and military leaders accorded with political and economic privileges that outpaced its Vietnamese counterparts. Historian Charles Wheeler summarized the Minh Hương's unique situation between the years 1653 and 1698 as follows:

The Ming Loyalists won a host of liberties from the Nguyễn court that far exceed anything one would expect to find even among a merchant elite, much less a band of starving refugees. The list of privileges included the right to manage overseas shipping, port management and trade customs. They governed the foreign merchant community in the kingdom's sea-trading cities. Moreover, members of Ming Loyalists villages enjoyed a host of liberties that were normally reserved for Vietnamese: they could legally marry Vietnamese, own land, take the civil service examinations, hold government office, and hold royal titles...Still the advantages did not end there, because Minh Hương retained their informal status as Chinese too. They used this privilege to maintain memberships in the key cultural institutions of trade and merchant society within the Tang Chinese colonies proliferating everywhere—namely clan halls, spirit temples and monasteries.<sup>10</sup>

The fact that both sides of the Tây Sơn rivalries—Nguyễn Huệ's forces and the Nguyễn lord's armies—relied heavily on Minh Hương resources and support to recruit soldiers and finance their operations further attested to the critical yet intricate roles that Minh Hương Chinese played in Southern imperial politics and economy.<sup>11</sup> While Minh Hương identities had been more or less fractured toward the end of this conflict, their status as an institutionalized "bureaucratic-mercantile 'minority elite'"<sup>12</sup> and persisting influence did not cede to matter when a nascent

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<sup>9</sup> Trịnh Hoài Đức, *Gia Định Thông Chí, Histoire et Description de La Basse Cochinchine (Pays de Gia Định)*, Paris : Imprimerie Imperiale, 1864, pp. 10-18.

<sup>10</sup> Charles Wheeler, "Interests, Institutions, and Identity: Strategic Adaptation and the Ethno-evolution of Minh Hương (Central Vietnam), 16<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> Centuries," *Itinerario*, Vol. 39, No 1, (April 2015: 141-166), p. 153.

<sup>11</sup> For detail, see George Edson Dutton, *The Tây Sơn Uprising: Society and Rebellion in Eighteenth-Century Vietnam*, Southeast Asia--Politics, Meaning, and Memory (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, p. 32.

Nguyễn Dynasty rose to power at the turn of the nineteenth century. Unsurprisingly, emperor Gia Long (Nguyễn Ánh) continued to recognize the Minh Hương Chinese as an official minority within the state, which enabled them to form distinct communities residing in separate administrative units called Minh Hương Xã (or Minh Hương villages). By this time, members of Minh Hương Xã, classed as ethnic Chinese, enjoyed reduced taxes and access to official court positions while being exempted from mandatory military conscription and forced labor.<sup>13</sup>

This situation shifted drastically when Gia Long's son, emperor Minh Mạng, who reigned from 1820 to 1841, pursued aggressive assimilation policies to incorporate the Chinese into mainstream Vietnamese society. This was implemented via a variety of stringent policies in 1829 and 1842 when Chinese migrants were banned from going back to China and accorded with different immigration status than those arriving later—now designated as the immigrant Chinese.<sup>14</sup> By the mid-nineteenth century, Minh Hương as a category thus began to develop new legal connotations when those identified by the imperial court as members of this group now included anyone with ethnic Chinese descent or *métisses* (mixed race)—often referred to as Sino-Vietnamese—as the offspring from intermarriage between Chinese and Vietnamese parents. This meant that by joining a Nguyễn-legislated associations of Minh Hương villages, Chinese settlers were encouraged to interact with local villagers and to adopt Vietnamese cultural practices in a cautious effort to subject Minh Hương to similar rights and benefits as those offered to the Vietnamese. For example, Minh Hương children were prohibited from “shaving their head and wearing pigtails...and must be registered as a member of the Minh Hương congregation when they

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<sup>13</sup> Robert Dubreuil, *De La Condition des Chinois et de leur Rôle Economique en Indochine*, Unpublished Thesis, (Paris : University of Paris, 1910), p. 12.

<sup>14</sup> Choi Byung Wook, *Southern Vietnam under the Reign of Minh Mạng (1820-1841): Central Policies and Local Response*, Southeast Asia Program Series, no. 20 (Ithaca, N.Y: Southeast Asia Program Publications, Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 2004), p. 147.

reached eighteen and abandon their parents' nationalities.”<sup>15</sup> As the Nguyễn expanded its territories southward, incomplete settlements and economic potentials in the Mekong Delta presented numerous opportunities for further Chinese migration. As a result, between 1829 and 1830, 1,114 Chinese arrived at the district of Gia Định. From the last two months of 1830 to the first four months of 1831, about 1,640 others settled in the area.<sup>16</sup>

Under the Nguyễn dynasty, Chinese migration and settlement were regulated by a system called *bang*, in which population was categorized by dialect-based communities. Each bang would nominate their head officers to act as liaisons for communication on various political and economic issues with the Nguyễn emperors. Later on, this system of control was adopted and perfected under the French when they nominally ruled over the southern colony of Cochinchina. The French entitled this new system *congrégation*—a native-place association form of control that required all Chinese to be registered and taxed accordingly based on their places of origins. By 1871, there were seven of these associations recognized by colonial law including Canton, Fujian, Hakka, Chaozhou (also Teochew), Fuzhou, and Quanzhou.<sup>17</sup> In addition to using *congrégation* as a mechanism of control, the French also sought to benefit from pre-existing Chinese economic networks including their diasporic trade routes and competitive advantages over indigenous populations in “rice production, fisheries, and other staple industries.”<sup>18</sup> The Chinese were also valuable colonial intermediaries who filled “the French colonizer’s manpower needs and provided revenue.” They operated opium revenue farms that served as the financial mainstays for the

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<sup>15</sup> Nguyễn Thế Anh, *Kinh Tế và Xã Hội Việt Nam dưới Các Vua Triều Nguyễn* [The Vietnamese Economy and Society under the Nguyễn King], Sài Gòn: Lửa Thiêng, 1968, pp. 42-50.

<sup>16</sup> Nguyễn Thế Anh, “L’immigration chinoise et la colonisation du delta du Mékong,” *The Vietnam Review* 1 (Autumn-Winter 1996), pp. 154-177. Access online at: [http://paristimes.net/fr\\_culture/immigr-chinoise-ntheanh.html](http://paristimes.net/fr_culture/immigr-chinoise-ntheanh.html)

<sup>17</sup> Tracy C. Barrett, *The Chinese Diaspora in Southeast Asia: The Overseas Chinese in Indo-China*, Library of China Studies (London: Tauris, 2012), pp. 13-14.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 23.

colonial bureaucracy.<sup>19</sup> With the emergence of Sài Gòn as a cosmopolitan, coastal city and Chợ Lớn as its adjacent “Chinatown”, the Chinese occupied another predominant economic segment within the colonial economy of Cochinchina—the colonial rice trade. Indeed, as Li Tana once remarked, “at the heart of Chinese commerce in Vietnam, the rice trade was the main index of Chinese prosperity.”<sup>20</sup>

At the dawn of the colonial era, the cities of Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn were at the center of a “water frontier”—a vast maritime borderland frequented by southern Chinese junk traders and itinerant merchants.<sup>21</sup> Transformed by intensive French modernization projects and Chinese diasporic capitalism, the twin cities became the French empire’s preeminent transoceanic base in East Asia, linking Vietnam to Southern China via the Mekong Delta rivers and to the French concessions in Shanghai, Pondicherry, and onto Marseilles via the Suez Canal by 1869.<sup>22</sup> In the aftermath of the two Opium Wars when the Qing Empire was eventually defeated at the hand of British naval forces in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, commercial trade at southern China’s port cities, including Canton and Hong Kong, was seriously disrupted by domestic rebellions and British skirmishes.<sup>23</sup> This led Chinese merchants, especially those with financial resources, to seek investment opportunities elsewhere. As the development of French colonial capitalism intensified patterns of commercial and cultural exchanges in south Vietnam, Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn became an ideal destination, which

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<sup>19</sup> Li Tana, “The Chinese in Vietnam” in Lynn Pan and Chinese Heritage Center (Singapore), eds., *The Encyclopedia of the Chinese Overseas* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1999).

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Nola Cooke and Tana Li, *Water Frontier: Commerce and the Chinese in the Lower Mekong Region, 1750-1880* (Singapore; Lanham, MD: Singapore University Press ; Rowman & Littlefield, 2004).

<sup>22</sup> Christopher E. Goscha, *The Penguin History of Modern Vietnam* ([London], UK: Allen Lane, an imprint of Penguin Books, 2016), p. 161.

<sup>23</sup> Song-Chuan Chen, *Merchants of War and Peace British Knowledge of China in the Making of the Opium War*. (HK: Hong Kong University Press, 2017).

continued to receive streams of migrants from a now vulnerable Qing China who came to the city as traders, laborers, and political exiles.

Simultaneously, French colonialism also changed the face of this formerly waterlogged city and the little town only six kilometers away from it. Before the advent of the French conquest with the assistance of Spanish expeditionary force in 1859, Sài Gòn was generally described as a place well-endowed with natural strengths—having benefitted from the rich resources of the Mekong Delta and its water-based navigational systems—but also viewed with much doubt, if not contempt, by European visitors as a swampy area with sporadic commercial exchanges and a bleak future for infrastructural development.<sup>24</sup> Only a decade later, British observers presented a quite different opinion, calling Sài Gòn “the Paris of the East” and “the Pearl of the Orient” as they waxed lyrically about its exuberant modernity. “The streets become wider, the houses and shops more resplendent, and further on, as we approach the beautiful cathedral, we come across wide boulevards, and pass beautiful residences of the French inhabitants and fine government buildings.” “The cost of living in Sài Gòn,” this reporter exclaimed, “must be extremely high.”<sup>25</sup>

The city’s bustling commerce was also noted; some visitors could not help but compare it to Singapore—then Sài Gòn’s most important trading partner but also occasional competitor—and admirably name it “a progressive city” and “the future queen of the East.”<sup>26</sup> Reporting on the state of commerce in Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn with vested interest and wariness, the *Straits Times* scrupulously

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<sup>24</sup> See Raoul Postel, *A Travers la Cochinchine* (Paris : Challamel Aine, Librairie Coloniale, 1887), p. 80-99 ; Jean Bouchot, *Documents pour servir à l’histoire de Sài Gòn, 1859-1865* (Sài Gòn : Albert Portail, 1927).

<sup>25</sup> Correspondence, “The Parts of the East: The Frenchman’s Home in Sài Gòn.” *The North - China Herald and Supreme Court & Consular Gazette* (1870-1941), Aug 16, 1919.

<sup>26</sup> Such positive views of modernized Sài Gòn could be found in the rare accounts of itinerant Chinese merchants on their visit to Sài Gòn to establish business connections in the 1880s. A Hokkien merchant, Tan Siu Eng 陳琇榮 from Batavia described the “harmonization of French rule,” making Sài Gòn by no means inferior to Singapore or Hong Kong. See Claudine Salmon and Tạ Trọng Hiệp, “Wang Annan Riji 往安南日記 [A record of a voyage to Annam]: A Hokkien Literatus Visits Sài Gòn (1890),” *Chinese Southern Diaspora Studies*, Volume 4, 2010:74-88.

cited statistics from their correspondents: “the tonnage frequenting the port rose from 834,430 tons in 1902 to 1,695,515 tons in 1907” and “the volume of trade in imports and exports together shot up from a value of over 259 million of francs in 1902 to nearly 892 million in 1907.”<sup>27</sup> The robust Chinese presence in Chợ Lớn and its vibrant trading scenes also captivated foreign investors. One calls it a “veritable Chinese town” in a city of abundance where a large number of British traders came in in the spring and winter months to search for rice cargoes and where “all the large rice mills—the largest to the east of Singapore” were to be found.<sup>28</sup>

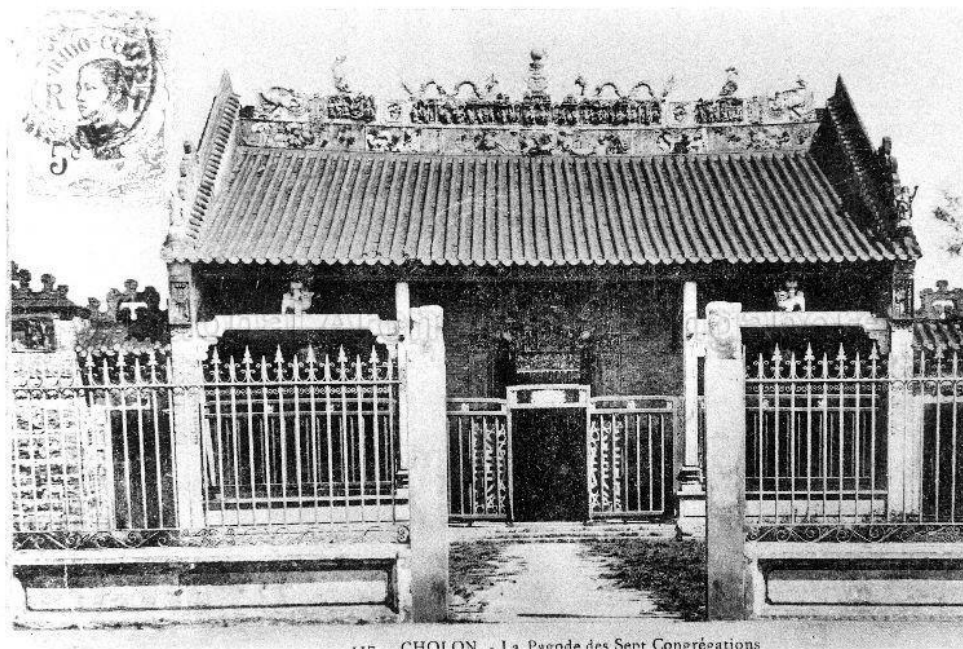
At the turn of the twentieth century, Chợ Lớn thus had become essentially a “Chinese city” due to the evolving nature of the Chinese community settlements and their developing commercial networks, both within and beyond Vietnam. But this did not mean Chinese migrants were the only residents in this plurally inter-ethnic space: they were but a key co-participant in an increasingly complex social and cultural landscape where Europeans, Vietnamese, and Indians as well as smaller temporary communities of seasonal Arab and Malay traders interacted and carved out their domains of engagement and competition.<sup>29</sup> The consolidation of robust Chinese communities and the thrust of Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn into a globalized web of commerce under French rule further rendered southern Vietnam a complex space of multi-ethnic co-existence whereby Chinese presence and inter-Asian interactions complicated and transformed its sociopolitical landscape.

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<sup>27</sup> Correspondent, “Progressive Sài Gòn. Commercial Enterprise of French Colonists. Future Queen of the East.” *The Straits Times*, January 20, 1909. NewspaperSG, NLB.

<sup>28</sup> Op-ed, “La Vie Sài Gònnaise.” *The Straits Times*, June 18, 1902. NewspaperSG, NLB.

<sup>29</sup> A recent work that explores this dimension is Natasha Pairaudeau, *Mobile Citizens: French Indians in Indochina, 1858-1954*, Nordic Institute of Asian Studies Monograph Series, no. 129 (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2016).



**Figure 1:** Chợ Lớn-The Pagoda of the Seven Congregations, C.1900s  
*Source: National Archives of Singapore (Image No: 19990006456-0038)*



Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

**Figure 2:** Chợ Lớn-Rue de Canton, Cochinchine  
*Source : [190 cartes postales de Cochinchine] Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Société de Géographie, SG WD-163*





**Figure 3:** Cartographical Sketch of the Mekong Delta Water Frontier and Maritime Southeast Asia (Nanyang)

Source: Cooke, Nola, and Tana Li, eds. *Water Frontier: Commerce and the Chinese in the Lower Mekong Region, 1750-1880*. World Social Change. Singapore : Lanham, MD: Singapore University Press ; Rowman & Littlefield, 2004. 18.



## Chinese Migration in Southern Vietnam and the Nanyang Networks

This dissertation repositions Chinese migrant communities in Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn and their wider connections to Asian port cities at the center of the well-studied South Sea (*Nanyang*) Chinese migratory networks in different colonial settings. Over five centuries, Chinese migration to Southeast Asia spanning a vast body of water known as the *Nanyang*—or, as the Japanese empire later designated it as *Nanyo*—has been a global epicenter of Chinese settlements and migratory activities along with the expansion of European colonialism in this region.<sup>30</sup> This prominent center thus occupies a distinctly established place within the study of global Chinese diaspora that has produced a prolific body of scholarship emphasizing the contributions of Chinese migrants at the intersection of inter-regional commercial expansion, urbanization, and colonial empire-building in Southeast Asia. In addition to a rich literature on the general history of Chinese communities in Thailand, Singapore, Malaya, the Dutch East Indies and the Philippines, thematically focused studies that explore the various dimensions of Chinese sociocultural, economic, and community institution continue to define and shape the focuses and orientation of the field at large.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Huei-Ying Kuo, “South Seas Chinese in Colonial Classifications,” in *Framing Asian Studies: Geopolitics and Institutions*, ed. Albert Tzeng, Ekaterina Koldunova, and William L. Richter (ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, 2018), 231–52; See also, Philip A. Kuhn, *Chinese among Others: Emigration in Modern Times*, Paperback ed., State and Society in East Asia (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009).

<sup>31</sup> For general histories of Chinese migration in the Nanyang region, see Gungwu Wang, *The Chinese Overseas: From Earthbound China to the Quest for Autonomy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002); Ching-Hwang Yen, *Chinese in Southeast Asia and Beyond, The: Socioeconomic and Political Dimensions* (Hackensack, NJ: World Scientific Pub Co Inc, 2008); Chong Guan Kwa, Mulin Ke, and Singapore Federation of Chinese Clan Associations, eds., *A General History of the Chinese in Singapore* (Singapore: Singapore Federation of Chinese Clan Associations : World Scientific, 2019); Cheng Lian Pang, *50 Years of the Chinese Community in Singapore* (New Jersey: World Scientific, 2016); Victor Purcell and Royal Institute of International Affairs, *The Chinese in Southeast Asia* (Oxford University Press, 1951); Edgar Wickberg, *The Chinese in Philippine Life, 1850-1898* (Manila: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2000); G. William Skinner, *Chinese Society in Thailand: An Analytical History* (ACLS History E-Book Project, 1899); Leo Suryadinata, *Chinese and Nation-Building in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Academic, 2004).

At the heart of the Nanyang and the foundation of a “Chinese century” in Southeast Asia, the history of Chinese migration to Singapore has been treated as a principal case study that sets a parameter for understanding the nature of predominantly Chinese societies in the region.<sup>32</sup> In a recent study, Stan Neil reinforces this point, showing how “Singapore’s rapid expansion, driven by Chinese immigration, preceded changes within the British empire and Anglo-Chinese relations that made Chinese labor migration to Singapore a desirable model for other colonies to follow,” thus “providing an example of a large Chinese population, living under British rule, which could be ‘exported’ to other parts of the Empire via onward migration.”<sup>33</sup> The Singapore model, according to Neil, thus relied on the prevalent application of the contractual credit-ticket system that resulted from the convergence of a labor surplus in China and the intensive colonial need for plantation and industrial labor in the Straits Settlement by the late nineteenth century. At the same time, the pre-existing Chinese mercantile connections across the Malaya-Indonesian archipelago, coasted upon this newly developed labor market and took advantage of British expansionist policies to build their own business empires, hence the formation of a distinct class of Chinese merchant elites clustering in the Nanyang region. This developmental template for Chinese capitalism manifests itself as the theoretical and methodological anchor for many studies on the subject.<sup>34</sup> Nordin Hussin in a comparative study of Melaka and Penang, for example, argues that

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<sup>32</sup> Craig A Lockard, “Chinese Migration and Settlement in Southeast Asia Before 1850: Making Fields from the Sea,” *History Compass* 11, no. 9 (2013): 765–81.

<sup>33</sup> Stan Neil, *Singapore, Chinese Migration and the Making of the British Empire, 1819-67*, *Worlds of the East India Company*, volume 17 (Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK: The Boydell Press, 2019), p. 17.

<sup>34</sup> For example, see Huei-Ying Kuo, “Agency amid Incorporation: Chinese Business Networks in Hong Kong and Singapore and the Colonial Origins of the Resurgence of East Asia, 1800-1940,” *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* 32, no. 3 (2009): 211–37; Huei-Ying Kuo, “Rescuing Businesses through Transnationalism: Embedded Chinese Enterprise and Nationalist Activities in Singapore in the 1930s Great Depression,” *Enterprise & Society* 7, no. 1 (2006): 98–127; Atsushi Kobayashi, “Growth of Regional Trade in Modern Southeast Asia: The Rise of Singapore, 1819-1913,” In Otsuka K., Sugihara K. (eds) *Paths to the Emerging State in Asia and Africa. Emerging-Economy State and International Policy Studies*. Springer, Singapore. 2019; Jason Lim, *Linking an Asian Transregional Commerce in Tea: Overseas Chinese Merchants in the Fujian-Singapore Trade, 1920-1960* (Brill, 2010); C. M. Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore, 1819-2005* (NUS Press, 2009).

the decline in the number of Chinese traders who arrived in the straits of Melaka was largely due to the Dutch East India Company (VOC)'s prohibitionist policy which diverted and confined Chinese migrants to Batavia. This situation began to shift, however, in the nineteenth century when a growing Chinese coolies market was being formed around agricultural settlements and plantations as a result of British colonialization. For this reason, "Melaka became an important port of disembarkation for Chinese migrants, from whence they traveled to Sumatra or into the interior of the Malaya Peninsula where the demand for labor was higher in the agricultural and mining industries."<sup>35</sup> Similarly, Yee Tuan Wong's research on the Big Five Chinese syndicates and William Tai Yuen's rigorous examination of Chinese capitalism in colonial Malaya both show that Chinese capitalism was "the creation of a historical process of evolution" that rested deeply upon a long history of Chinese migration in the Nanyang world but was dramatically transformed and reshaped in the framework of British colonialism.<sup>36</sup>

However, Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn as a key emporium in the Nanyang trade and the various political linkages forged by its Chinese communities, as this dissertation will show, did not fit neatly in this model that these selected studies on British Singapore, Malaya, or colonial Indonesia tend to follow. Over the last decade, a new wave of scholarship on urban history and transnational Chinese capitalism in the Nanyang has begun to frame urban spaces like Penang, Singapore, Java, or Hong Kong as critical zones of imperial contact and cosmopolitan port cities conducive to the making

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<sup>35</sup> Nordin Hussin, *Trade and Society in the Straits of Melaka: Dutch Melaka and English Penang, 1780-1830* (Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 2005), p. 54.

<sup>36</sup> William Tai Yuen, *Chinese Capitalism in Colonial Malaya 1900-1941* (Bangi: Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 2013), p. 420; See also, Yee Tuan Wong, *Penang Chinese Commerce in the 19th Century: The Rise and Fall of the Big Five*, Local History and Memoirs 24 (Singapore: ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute, 2015).

and consolidation of global capitalism.<sup>37</sup> Yet, whenever possible, Sài Gòn (and less so, Chợ Lớn) are accorded little significance and are only mentioned in passing in these discussion of Chinese networks and interregional interactions.<sup>38</sup> Chinese migrants in southern Vietnam, as the outcast of this existing framework, in my view, merits further exploration that generates important insights into the peculiar *modus operandi* of French colonial institutions in Vietnam and the dissimilarities in modes of interactions between this community and French colonists. First, unlike their counterparts in British Malaya, Chinese migration and settlements in colonial Vietnam, this study demonstrates, were the outcome of a much longer intertwined histories of Sino-Vietnamese imperial interactions and frontier expansion in the South that explained the existence of a much more “localized” communities, thus rendering colonial co-optation on the eve of conquest to be an immensely onerous task.<sup>39</sup> Existing Chinese networks, rooted in a precolonial history of frontier and transoceanic trade, also meant that migrant communities exercised numerous advantages over a newly arrived colonial authority in local knowledge, familiarity with local demography, and the internal and trans-local geographies of commerce. Second, the conditions that facilitated British control of the Straits Settlement—the large waves of Chinese coolie plantation labor that arrived *en masse* from southern Chinese ports by the late nineteenth century under the impact of British

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<sup>37</sup> For example, refer to Mark Ravinder Frost, “Emporium in Imperio: Nanyang Networks and the Straits Chinese in Singapore, 1819-1914,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 36, no. 1 (2005): 29–66; Lim, *Linking an Asian Transregional Commerce in Tea*; Elizabeth Sinn, “Hong Kong As An In-Between Place In The Chinese Diaspora, 1849–1939,” *Connecting Seas and Connected Ocean Rims*, January 1, 2011, 225–47; Hui Kian Kwee, *The Political Economy of Java’s Northeast Coast, c. 1740-1800: Elite Synergy*, TANAP Monographs on the History of the Asian-European Interaction, v. 3 (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2006).

<sup>38</sup> In my review of relevant literatures, Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn tend to appear most frequently in discussion of the opium trade in Southeast Asia, understandably as one of a key markets in the Nanyang linkages. For example, see Carl A. Trocki, “Opium and the Beginnings of Chinese Capitalism in Southeast Asia,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 33, no. 2 (2002): 297–314; Carl A. Trocki, *Opium, Empire, and the Global Political Economy: A Study of the Asian Opium Trade, 1750-1950*, Asia’s Transformations (London ; New York: Routledge, 1999); French Indochina was among one of the comparative case studies in Diana Kim’s exploration of the opium commerce in colonial Southeast Asia, but it focuses mainly on the post-1920 prohibition movements. See Diana S Kim, *Empires of Vice: The Rise of Opium Prohibition across Southeast Asia*, 2020.

<sup>39</sup> On this point, see Li, *Nguyễn Cochinchina*.

free trade imperialism—were virtually non-existent in colonial Indochina.<sup>40</sup> As the late arriver in the European colonial world in Southeast Asia, by 1863, the French colonial army captured what historians then describe as an “ambiguous colonization” plagued with resistance, fragmented territories, and no coherent economic planning underway.<sup>41</sup> As opposed to the British pattern of encouraging industry-oriented development, to counteract budget deficit and fill colonial pockets, French colonists relied on a model of revenue extraction initially from Chinese-dominated trade and then from the creation of head taxes and state monopolies. The lack of industrial expansion programs and increasingly prohibitionist policies that discouraged Chinese immigration during this period led to a few crucially different elements that distinguished the structure of Chinese communities in Vietnam from other colonies in Southeast Asia: a smaller Chinese population, the non-existence of comparable multi-corporation business tycoons in various industries such as Tan Kah Kee or Oei Tiong Ham, and the weaker structure of domination that merchant elites were able to wield over the local Chinese and other economic sectors within the colonial economy (such as the case of the *kongsi* in colonial Singapore). As Nola Cooke remarks, “Cochinchina never developed the same labor intensive, export oriented, and opium dependent plantation or extraction industries that numerous studies have showed shaped the economic system elsewhere.”<sup>42</sup>

Yet, despite these structural differences, I argue that the Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn and Nanyang connections, mediated by a comparatively smaller Chinese community, nevertheless remain

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<sup>40</sup> As a minor exception, early French economic policies did involve a short-lived experiment with importing coolie labor in the late 1870s. However, given the local wage structure and the presence of Vietnamese native in this labor market, hiring a Chinese coolie was more costly, which made the scheme financially unsustainable for the state soon after. See Jean André Lafargue, *L’immigration chinoise en Indochine: sa réglementation, ses conséquences économiques et politiques* (Paris: H. Jouve, 1909), p. 275.

<sup>41</sup> Pierre Brocheux et al., *Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization ; 1858 - 1954*, From Indochina to Vietnam 2 (Berkeley, Calif.: Univ. of California Press, 2009).

<sup>42</sup> Nola Cooke also further touches on some of these key differences in her scholarship, particularly in the ways that secret societies in colonial Vietnam did not enjoy the same political and economic power largely due to structural differences in local conditions. See Nola Cooke, “The Heaven and Earth Society Upsurge in Early 1880s French Cochinchina,” *Chinese Southern Diaspora Studies* 4 (2010): 42-73, p. 59.

crucial to our understanding of the inter-Asian networks that shaped colonial Vietnam and the history of Southeast Asian Chinese writ large. In many instances throughout this dissertation, for example, I show how Chinese commerce, transnational community initiatives, and cultural institutions in colonial Vietnam were not only active participants in the Nanyang trade, but also played an indispensable role in the global expansion of the French empire in Southeast Asia. Thwarted by French prohibitionist policies, Chinese rice merchants in Chợ Lớn continued to rely on their external connections to navigate the turbulent changes in global commerce as it was restructured by shifts in colonial politics: setting up branch offices in Hong Kong, maintaining trade with Singapore and southern China, and taking advantage of the Chinese diasporic networks to oppose unjust colonial regulations. The position of Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn as a strategically important center of commerce and the roles of its Chinese communities could be further seen in the fact that in 1906, a Singaporean-Chinese Wang-Ta-Cheng boarded a cruise ship to Sài Gòn and Hong Kong with a mission to equip the local Chinese there with the necessary knowledge and preparation to establish a local branch of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce—among the most important overseas Chinese institutions in the early twentieth century.<sup>43</sup> Instead of simply casting it as an outlier by an incomparable standard, I contend that a further exploration of this divergence guides us towards a comparative possibilities that enrich extant knowledge of the different operations of Chinese networks and their varying degree of influences in Southeast Asia. Located at a peculiar juncture of a “water frontier” that fostered a centuries-old diasporic trade and a weak colonial economy devoid of established industries that exploited Chinese mercantilism, the unique case of Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn’s Chinese communities thus provides an opportunity to reexamine the critical place of this community in the Southeast Asian imperial world.

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<sup>43</sup>« Le Consul de France à Canton à Monsieur le Gouverneur General de l’Indochine à Hà Nội, » GOUCOCH L.13 N5555, TTLTQGII-HCMC.

## **The Diaspora Debates: Diasporic Communities, Chinese-ness, and the Politics of Claiming**

Theorizing Chinese diasporas has generated intense debates within the field of global migration history over a few interwoven conceptual and methodological issues. First, the use of the term “diaspora” as a concept has never been consistent and bears various conflicting connotations—among which notions of mobility, forced displacement, and heterogeneity remain at the forefront of critiques.<sup>44</sup> Second, this definitional issue has a direct spillover effect on the study of Chinese migration (or Chinese diaspora studies as commonly acknowledged). The persistent contention with the application of “diaspora” to the Chinese context has led to a split into two different camps of scholarship. The first camp, exploring the cultural corridors, economic passageways, or historical ecologies formed between mainland China and dispersed Chinese people across the globe, often analyzes a bi-directional homeland-hostland relation that defined Chinese experiences in the modern world. This scholarship tends to project a China-centered perspective of migrant communities, suggesting that they maintained a strong cultural, economic, and political linkage that transformed China and their settle-in destinations.<sup>45</sup> The second one emerges in opposition to this first body of literature, which critiques the superimposed assumption of homogenous Chinese identities, its unequivocal acceptance of the nation-state, and its essentialized and bounded nature of “Chinese-ness.” In its effort to de-center mainland China, scholars working in this camp unsettle nation-centric narratives by celebrating diversity,

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<sup>44</sup> For a snapshot of this debate, see Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur, eds., *Theorizing Diaspora: A Reader*, Keyworks in Cultural Studies 6 (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub, 2003), p. 6-7.

<sup>45</sup> For example, see Kuhn, *Chinese among Others*; Philip A. Kuhn, “Why China Historians Should Study the Chinese Diaspora, and Vice-Versa,” *Journal of Chinese Overseas* 2, no. 2 (November 1, 2006): 163–72.

globalization, and the “perks” of transnationalism, embedded in concepts like “flexible citizenship”, “Chinese transnationalism”, and deterritorialization.<sup>46</sup>

In my view, these two diametrically opposing approaches while generating important insights into the making of Chinese identities generally limits our ability to imagine and articulate “diasporic” identification beyond (or within) the conceptual purview of the nation-state. As my dissertation reveals, the Chinese in Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn engaged in multi-directional networks, be them commercial, political, or cultural, that dialogically shifted in relations not only to French colonial policies in Indochina but also to the rise of Chinese nationalism and the evolving Nanyang situations. In the domain of Chinese education, for example, many Chinese traders and entrepreneurs in Chợ Lớn went against the common practices of sending their children to China for schooling—a practice frequently associated with the Chinese effort to cultivate and perpetuate their cultural ties with China. Instead, merchant elites, in an effort to further their business interests and equip their children with the knowledge of French culture, collaborated with French colonists in the construction of a Franco-Chinese high school and enrolled their children there with a view to sustaining their capital and penetrating the colonial social hierarchy. At a different moment, as we shall see in chapter 3, Sino-French ties shifted to be more ambiguous as I demonstrate in the case of the 1935 Franco-Chinese convention when the Great Depression put a toll on Chinese businesses and a struggling Republic of China attempted to challenge what it viewed as the exploitative colonial treatments of “Chinese citizens abroad.”<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> For example, see Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006); Aihwa Ong and Donald Macon Nonini, *Ungrounded Empires: The Cultural Politics of Modern Chinese Transnationalism* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Ien Ang, *On Not Speaking Chinese: Living Between Asia and the West*, 1 edition (London ; New York: Routledge, 2001); G. William Skinner, “Creolized Chinese Societies in Southeast Asia,” in *Sojourners and Settlers : Histories of Southeast Asia and the Chinese : In Honour of Jennifer Cushman*, 1996, 51–93.

<sup>47</sup> See Chapter 3 and 4 of this dissertation.



As a result, instead of getting caught in a dead end and in the possibly unproductive task of deciding whether we may define Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn's Chinese in the framework of a categorical "diaspora," in line with recent works in global Chinese migration, I am more interested in investigating the multifaceted processes of unfolding interactions and (self)-identifications that constituted different layers of "diasporic" identities and how they were shaped by local and transnational historical forces. In this manner, this dissertation explores what Dominic Meng-Hsuan Yang advocates in his most recent research on Chinese migration from mainland China to Taiwan as "the politics of claiming diaspora."<sup>48</sup> I argue that, in the case of Vietnam, Chinese identities have always been much more contingent and reflexive than this aforementioned binary of China-centricism and globalization theory literatures would be able to capture. By analyzing Chinese interactions with and shifting socioeconomic practices against the colonial state and situating them in ever-changing global contexts, the dissertation, as both a history of Chinese migration and inter-ethnic relations, refrains from imposing the notion of an "imaginary Chinese homeland"<sup>49</sup> on Chinese identity formations and their relations with the French or other Chinese networks, but instead, explicates how these identities were formed and constantly (re)-articulated.

Consequently, my dissertation thus further builds on a new frontier of scholarship in Chinese migration studies that recognizes Chinese-ness as a "discursive representation" and a project of systematic politico-cultural inventions, codifications, and regulations, often contradicting the realities of the lived experiences that shaped it and "acting as the sources of the many crises of modernity."<sup>50</sup> To better understand the *modus operandi* of Chinese identity formations in Sài Gòn-

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<sup>48</sup> Dominic Meng-Hsuan Yang, *The Great Exodus from China: Trauma, Memory, and Identity in Modern Taiwan* (Cambridge, United Kingdom ; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 9-11.

<sup>49</sup> Frost, "Emporium in Imperio."

<sup>50</sup> Allen Chun, *Forget Chineseness: On the Geopolitics of Cultural Identification* (SUNY Press, 2018); Prasenjit Duara, *The Crisis of Global Modernity: Asian Traditions and a Sustainable Future* (Cambridge University Press, 2015).

Chợ Lớn, I draw on Shu-Mei Shih's articulation of the "Sinophone" that de-territorializes the static notion of a Chinese homeland and questions a China-centric approach to making sense of Chinese-ness. In *Visuality and Identity*, Shih conceives the "Sinophone" as a malleable construction and "a historical formation that constantly undergoes transformation reflecting local needs and conditions."<sup>51</sup> Likewise, in this dissertation, I track the evolution of Chinese identities by paying close attention to the various levels of diasporic, colonial, and inter-Asian interactions in the (trans)-local contexts, including the colonial rice trade, the Southeast Asian opium commerce, Chinese education and cultural practices, and immigration. Through these sites of interaction, I advance Shih's approach by foregrounding the case of colonial Vietnam and demonstrating how Chinese diasporic identities in Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn were inextricably linked to not only the macro-institutional processes of globalization, colonial modernization, and Vietnamese nation-formation but also decisively shaped by variegated individual Chinese experiences and shifting diasporic relations to a China in the midst of political transformations.

In her recent study, Taomo Zhou unpacks the intertwinement of domestic ethnic politics, the Chinese revolution, and diaspora in shaping postwar Indonesian Chinese identities.<sup>52</sup> Building on Zhou's insights, this dissertation illuminates how a comparable dynamic, still unexplored in the scholarship on modern Vietnam and Nanyang Chinese politics, took place even earlier in colonial Vietnam: the Chinese in Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn, entangled in colonial reforms, revolutionary politics, and the pulls of overseas Chinese nationalism, continuously reinvented themselves by making identity claims that safeguarded their interests while resisting the hegemonic colonial and ROC's efforts to reclaim and contest their loyalties. As such, this history of inter-ethnic interactions treats

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<sup>51</sup> Shu-mei Shih, *Visuality and Identity: Sinophone Articulations across the Pacific*, First edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), p.27.

<sup>52</sup> Taomo Zhou, *Migration in the Time of Revolution: China, Indonesia, and the Cold War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019).

Chinese identities and their relations to colonial rule as historical and temporal formations, formulated through historical changes and sociopolitical interactions.

### **Chinese Migration and Relationship to Colonialism**

A consistent tension in colonial history and the studies of ethnic Chinese communities in formerly colonized societies has remained a debate over Chinese political allegiances and the nature of their relationship to the European colonial powers. Jennifer Cushman's classic *Family and State* explores Chinese deployment of kinship networks to expand diasporic venture and penetrate local Siamese politics, which enabled the formation of one of the most powerful alliances in Thai history between the Khaw and Na Nakhons. Through exclusive tax-collecting rights and a "vertical integration" of the Southeast Asian businesses, the family-based corporation erected a much-needed foundation for colonial capitalism.<sup>53</sup> Carl Trocki's lifelong scholarship on the opium trade in colonial Singapore has established the foundational knowledge that expounds on the roles of the Chinese *kongsi* in forging not only a condition of co-dependency with British institutions in dominating the Straits opium market in but also a contested relationship with the colonial state characterized by resistance, cooperation, and intra-ethnic conflicts.<sup>54</sup> Most recently, Peter Post and May Ling Thio's research on a prominent Peranakan Chinese family—the Kwee of Ciledug—using the private visual records they left behind reveals the strategic alliances they built and sustained with local Javanese and Dutch colonial elites, capturing how "hybridity and modernity acted side by side, and influenced the way the family managed to maintain their wealth and social

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<sup>53</sup> Jennifer W. Cushman, *Family and State: The Formation of a Sino-Thai Tin-Mining Dynasty 1797-1932*, ed. Craig J. Reynolds (Singapore ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

<sup>54</sup> For example, see Carl A. Trocki, *Opium and Empire: Chinese Society in Colonial Singapore, 1800-1910*, Asia, East by South (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1990); Carl A. Trocki, "Opium and the Beginnings of Chinese Capitalism in Southeast Asia," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 33, no. 2 (2002): 297–314.

status.”<sup>55</sup> Together, these studies show that Chinese migrants were neither merely empire’s collaborators nor aggressive exploitators, indifferent to politics and driven by avarice, as much as they were implicated in the structure of colonial oppression.<sup>56</sup> In my dissertation, I thus reject the reductive binary casting Chinese migrants as either “apolitical capitalists” or “European collaborators”—paradigms that respectively persist in the Eurocentric and nation-centric histories of this community.<sup>57</sup> As a result, I develop an alternative framework to explore Sino-European power relations in Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn by mapping out dominant sites of crisscrossing interactions whereby Chinese encounters with the colonial state were diverse, fluid, and at times contentious.

In emphasizing these multifaceted modes of Sino-French interactions, I engage the scholarship in postcolonial studies and their critiques in which the narrow framework of resistance and domination tends to be deployed as an encompassing explanation for all colonial relations, ignoring the complexity of specific local contexts.<sup>58</sup> Non-elite resistance and domination have been among one of the most salient features of the colonial encounter, reputedly advanced by the Subaltern studies collective. Yet, this binary, as a body of new literature in social and cultural history of Chinese migration has demonstrated, has practical limits in capturing meaningful historical changes and remains not too helpful with understanding the agencies of historical actors

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<sup>55</sup> Peter Post and May Ling Thio, *The Kwee Family of Ciledug: A Family, Status and Modernity in Colonial Java Visualising the Private Life of the Peranakan Chinese Sugar* (Volendam: LM Publishers, 2019), p. 54.

<sup>56</sup> Elsewhere, I have examined in detail a rich body of scholarship that argues for the contingent and fluid nature of the ethnic Chinese/colonial state relationships that questions any essentialized view. See Anh Sy Huy Le, “The Studies of Chinese Diasporas in Colonial Southeast Asia: Theories, Concepts, and Histories,” *China and Asia* 1, no. 2 (December 20, 2019): 225–63.

<sup>57</sup> Martin J. Murray, *The Development of Capitalism in Colonial Indochina (1870-1940)* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980); Charles Robequain, *The Economic Development of French Indo-China* (Oxford UK: Oxford University Press, 1944).

<sup>58</sup> Gail Hershatte advances her well-known critique of the subaltern studies approach, particularly in its inability to explain the complex social and political relations in semi-colonial China and the differing structures of class and gender between China and India. See Gail Hershatte, “The Subaltern Talks Back: Reflections on Subaltern Theory and Chinese History,” *Positions: Asia Critique* 1, no. 1 (February 1, 1993): 103–30.

in “swing groups”—as in my case, “quasi-colonial” subjects as Chinese migrants in Vietnam.<sup>59</sup> The structure of colonial oppression and ethnic distinctions, be they the mechanisms that colonial capitalism invented or the racialized patterns of urban development, was not linear and single-handedly constructed by the colonial state, thus requiring an approach that does not treat “subalternity” as a given, non-relational “class” position. In Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn, for example, Chinese merchants could occupy quite comfortably both situations: they could be accused of being “an exploitative class” by Vietnamese colonial subjects yet remained “subaltern” in comparison as they faced colonial repression. Additionally, a very real class divide between Chinese elites and poor migrants complicated the otherwise simplistic “resistance and domination” power dynamic as my dissertation shows. As a result, in contrast, my project analyzes what John Carroll in his study of Chinese elites in colonial Hong Kong conceptualizes as the “manifold layers of subalternity” and their multiple relational degrees, elucidating how Chinese relationships to French colonizers in Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn often fluctuated between subversive, collaborative, and openly confrontational.<sup>60</sup> By considering the dialogical and fluid nature of this relationship through several concrete case studies—the colonial rice trade, health and cultural institutions, immigration surveillance, crime and informal economy, and nationalist politics—my research opens up a new opportunity to theorize Chinese relations to colonized Vietnamese and French colonial authority, hence better placing this community in dialogue with the cases in other Southeast Asian colonies and the global Chinese diasporas writ large.

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<sup>59</sup> See Karen M. Teoh, *Schooling Diaspora: Women, Education, and the Overseas Chinese in British Malaya and Singapore, 1850s-1960s*, 1 edition (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018); Christopher Munn, *Anglo-China: Chinese People and British Rule in Hong Kong, 1841–1880* (Aberdeen, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008); Andrew R. Wilson, *Ambition and Identity: Chinese Merchant Elites in Colonial Manila, 1880-1916* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2004); Richard T. Chu, *Chinese and Chinese Mestizos of Manila: Family, Identity, and Culture, 1860s-1930s*, Chinese Overseas, v. 1 (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2010).

<sup>60</sup> John M. Carroll, *Edge of Empires: Chinese Elites and British Colonials in Hong Kong* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 10.

While instances of elite collaborationism and political activism pervaded my historical analysis throughout the dissertation, I have tried whenever possible to unearth and highlight the resistance of everyday Chinese people whose voices and stories were buried in the heaps of institutional records. The “subaltern” Chinese spoke when they were taxed indiscriminately and deprived of livelihood. They resisted hegemonic categorization and subjection to legal categories invented by the colonial state. They maneuvered any resources available at hands—Straits Chinese relations, transnational commercial capital, and local connections to French administrators or village notables—to subvert colonial regulations. Although elusive and at times silenced by dominant administrative voices, the subaltern surfaced in the archives at critical juncture of political challenges that exposed the state’s inability to meet those basic demands it claimed to provide. In so doing, I seek to rescue the “apolitical and lawless Chinese”<sup>61</sup> not only from the erasure of popular nationalism but also, in the indelible words of the noted historian E.P. Thompson, from the “condescension of posterity.”<sup>62</sup> Far from merely submissive and opportunistic historical actors, Chinese migrants, remarkably diverse in places of origins and shifting political orientations, vied for their places in the colonial society and managed to navigate the contradictory turbulence of colonial rule. These modes of interactions with the colonial state were arguably more consequential than often acknowledged; and those cultural and political impacts continue to remain at the center of inquiry in this dissertation.

At the heart of the colonial projects, on the one hand, lay a core responsibility to practice, cultivate, and uphold a self-proclaimed mission of enlightening their subjects in the name of modernity and progress. As scholars of colonial Indochina demonstrate, heavy investments in

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<sup>61</sup> Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

<sup>62</sup> Edward Palmer Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (IICA, 1966), p.12.

infrastructure, the constructions of railway and extensive transport networks, the creations of new labor and commercial markets, and the establishments of financial institutions and later colonial plantation—interlinked domains captured in the framework of “colonial capitalism”—brought about seismic transformations inconceivable by any Nguyễn emperors or Vietnamese forebearers.<sup>63</sup> On the other hand, confronting a so-called multi-ethnic space, the French had to constantly navigate a treacherous field of interactions and the developments of ethnic institutions beyond their control. In order to achieve this goal, the colonial state reinvented itself and strategically revised its approaches in response to Chinese mobile practices.<sup>64</sup> The links between colonial capitalist modernity—as an “progressive aspiration”<sup>65</sup> and as evolving frameworks of domination, contestation, and negotiation—and various Chinese institutions, including their commercial networks and economic contingents in southern Vietnam constitute a key exploration in this dissertation. John Furnivall once famously argues in a *locus classicus* on the Netherland East Indies that the management of pluralism was a prerequisite to developing, sustaining, and taking control of the political economy.<sup>66</sup> Applying Furnivall’s core argument, I argue that examining the dialectics of colonial control and how ethnic Chinese communities managed to co-

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<sup>63</sup> For example, see Pierre Brocheux, *The Mekong Delta: Ecology, Economy, and Revolution, 1860-1960*, Monograph / University of Wisconsin-Madison. Center for Southeast Asian Studies, no. 12 (Madison, WI, USA: Center for Southeast Asian Studies, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1995); Gerard Sarges, *Imperial Intoxication: Alcohol and the Making of Colonial Indochina*, Southeast Asia: Politics, Meaning, and Memory (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2017); Michitake Aso, *Rubber and the Making of Vietnam: An Ecological History, 1897–1975* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2018); David W. del Testa, “‘Imperial Corridor’: Association, Transportation and Power in French Colonial Indochina 1,” *Science, Technology and Society* 4, no. 2 (September 1, 1999): 319–54.

<sup>64</sup> On strategies of colonial inter-ethnic administration, see for example Philippe Peycam, “From the Social to the Political: 1920s Colonial Sài Gòn as a ‘Space of Possibilities’ in Vietnamese Consciousness,” *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 21, no. 3 (September 15, 2013): 496–546; Rajesh Rai, *Indians in Singapore, 1819-1945: Diaspora in the Colonial Port City*, First edition (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014); Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule: With a New Preface* (Berkeley ;Los Angeles ;London: University of California Press, 2010).

<sup>65</sup> Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

<sup>66</sup> J. S Furnivall, *Netherlands India a Study of Plural Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

exist and interacted with the colonial state reorients our understandings of not only colonial governance but also strategies of inter-ethnic administration that undergirded the recurrent tension in Franco-Chinese relations. As such, this dissertation treats colonial rule “not as some bundle of abstract policies handed down above according to the exigencies of the time, but an array of daily relationships negotiated through confrontation and compromises, at home and at work, in the courts and on the streets.”<sup>67</sup>

This approach further reveals the limits of colonial modernity, which, as Frederick Cooper insists, “reduces the conflicting strategies of colonization to a modernity perhaps never experienced by those being colonized, and gives insufficient weight to the ways in which colonized people sought—not entirely without success—to build lives in the crevices of colonial power, deflecting, appropriating, or reinterpreting the teachings and preachings thrust upon them.”<sup>68</sup> Contrary to the situation facing the indigenous population, this dissertation shows how the French, instead of viewing Chinese migrants as subjects to be “civilized,” cast the communities as those to be “tamed” and restrained in order to optimize colonial rule, given existing Chinese predominance in the (pre)colonial economy. Here, my use of “taming” in the title of this dissertation is intentional and requires clarification. By employing “taming” as a conceptual underpinning, I aim to evoke a Foucauldian sense of biopolitical subject-management that exercises the sovereign’s privileges to decide matters of life and death and to invent mechanisms “to generate, incite, reinforce, control, monitor, optimize and organizes the forces under it.”<sup>69</sup> As opposed to simply “controlling” or “managing,” “taming” implies a recognition of the subjects’ power and their potentials. It is a repeated experiment and a multi-modal political project to seek

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<sup>67</sup> Christopher Munn, *Anglo-China: Chinese People and British Rule in Hong Kong, 1841–1880* (Aberdeen, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008), p. 18.

<sup>68</sup> Cooper, *Colonialism in Question*, p. 18.

<sup>69</sup> Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose, “Biopower Today,” *BioSocieties* 1, no. 2 (June 1, 2006): 195–217, p. 5.



out and identify the limits as well as the generative future of such a power while harnessing them for the benefits of the “sovereign.” In the words of Richard Baxstrom as he writes about governmentality and control of the Malayan-Tamil workers in the plantations of colonial Malaya, economic and political regulations of subject population is therefore “the corresponding attempt to transform subaltern selves from merely ruled subjects to disciplined colonial citizens and workers through biopolitical technique.”<sup>70</sup> To understand these perspectives of power relations requires systematic reexaminations of Chinese roles in the colonial political economy, their belongings to a transnational network of commerce where colonial competitions, inter-Asian interactions, and Sino-Europeans interactions all shaped French institutions and Chinese practices.

Modernity, as explained, thus proved to be a much more collaborative and mutually driven project, making Cochinchina far from an exclusive playfield of French on-the-ground modern experimentations. During my research in the colonial archives, I find numerous circumstances in which French colonists often found no trouble vocalizing their contempt for uncurbed Chinese mobility and yet were immediately challenged by their own contradictions, which reflected a perpetual irony circumscribed by their own reliance on Chinese-led informal economies. In response, Chinese merchants elites, congregation leaders, and immigrant laborers found their own niches in how they chose to resist, maneuver, or work around sets of colonial impositions. In exploring this co-dependency, this dissertation suggests that Chinese migrants’ cultural, political, and economic networks were crucial co-participants in the construction and realization of the French modernization projects. This situates my argument in line with a body of scholarship on pre-colonial Vietnamese history wherein a critical examination of earlier Chinese communities

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<sup>70</sup> Richard Baxstrom, “Governmentality, Bio-Power, and the Emergence of the Malayan-Tamil Subject on the Plantations of Colonial Malaya,” *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 14, no. 2 (2000): 49–78, p. 55.

disrupts an overdetermined notion that “modern Vietnam” began with French colonial capitalism—<sup>71</sup> “an enterprise governed not only by the strength of a Western dream but also the new rationality of the modern world.”<sup>72</sup> While some works in the scholarship on colonial Indochina actively downplayed or neglected the continuity of Chinese institutions and networks in the colonial period, this study continues to show the theoretical imperatives of bringing back Chinese migration to this conversation, demonstrating how Chinese capitalism, networks, and institutions formed the bedrock for the development of colonial capitalism and modernity.

### **The Place of Chinese Migrants in Vietnamese History: Nationalism and Re-Periodization Potentials**

Where is the place for a history of Chinese migration and inter-ethnic relations in the narratives of modern Vietnamese history? And how may such a history alter existing understandings of major periods in Vietnamese history, still largely dominated and landmarked by revolutionary events? Setting out to answer these questions, this dissertation makes two propositions. First, a history of Chinese migrant communities in southern Vietnam, exploring their transnational connections and complex relationship to the colonial state, problematizes an existing issue in the historiography of what George Dutton terms “in-between periods dealing with collective actions that do not fit.”<sup>73</sup> In his excellent historiographic overview, Dutton points out an

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<sup>71</sup> Some representative examples include Nola Cooke, “Regionalism and the Nature of Nguyễn Rule in Seventeenth-Century Dang Trong (Cochinchina),” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 29, no. 1 (1998): 122–61; Choi Byung Wook, *Southern Vietnam under the Reign of Minh Mạng (1820-1841)*; Claudine Ang, *Poetic Transformations: Eighteenth-Century Cultural Projects on the Mekong Plains*, Harvard East Asian Monographs 419 (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Harvard University Asia Center, 2019); Wheeler, “Re-Thinking the Sea in Vietnamese History”; Charles James Wheeler, *Cross-Cultural Trade and Trans-Regional Networks in the Port of Hoi An: Maritime Vietnam in the Early Modern Era* (Yale University, 2001); Tana Li, “An Alternative Vietnam? The Nguyễn Kingdom in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 29, no. 1 (1998): 111–21.

<sup>72</sup> Brocheux et al., *Indochina*, p. 14.

<sup>73</sup> George Dutton, “Threatening Histories: Rethinking the Historiography of Colonial Vietnam,” *Critical Asian Studies* 45, no. 3 (September 1, 2013): 365–92, p. 371.

endemic problem facing modern Vietnamese history: the tendency of a body of mainstream historical writings in Vietnamese and French to co-opt or erase historical actors that do not fit a linear, teleological narrative commonly deployed to explain a sense of inevitable unification and common nationalist objectives. This reformulation of historical narratives, discounting heterodox elements or unfitting outliers, manifest itself in various forms, from anti-colonial nationalism, which reduces the complexity of the colonial situation to a colonizer-colonized binary, to the “inevitability of the revolution” trope wherein the roles of “outsiders” are unacknowledged or discursively de-emphasized. In these homogenizing historical meta-narratives, secret societies, ethnic minorities, religious organizations, and political transgressors emerged as non-actors either passively lingering in the shadow of the past or quietly serving for collective goals of the state. Here, I argue that the delegitimization of Chinese political agency is a systematic consequence of a historical erasure located in the converging goals of anti-colonial nationalism that sought to disaggregate the legacies of colonial capitalism and of an ethnocentric historiography that essentialized Chinese communities as a single group preoccupied with pure capitalist self-interests and thus were politically ignorant. A related analysis from a scholar writing about this period reflected this problematic conceptual underpinning:

Despite their great wealth and economic power, the Chinese in South Vietnam are *politically weak*. They have traditionally avoided involvement in Vietnamese politics. Their primary concerns are *self-preservation* and economic *prosperity*; they are generally *indifferent to* political ideology and politics. They have a highly organized networks of clan groups, private clubs, occupational guilds, secret societies, gangster syndicates, welfare organizations, chamber of commerce, and other institutions, and their intramural politics is active and intense. In dealing with the Vietnamese authorities, however, they are conscious of their minority status and usually maintain group identity and solidarity. Their external relationships with the Sài Gòn government are generally conducted through elected or otherwise designated representatives.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Thomas S. An, “The Overseas Chinese in South Vietnam: A Note,” *Vietnam Perspectives* 2, no. 4 (1967): 13–19, p. 15.

This dissertation seeks to dismantle these assumed essentializing characteristics—“self-preservation”, “politically weak and indifference”, and driven by “profits and self-interests”—which have been employed understandably to downplay the significance of Chinese roles in colonial politics and as Patricia Pelley argues, to “erode the negative images of Vietnam that so routinely surfaced in colonial texts” on the impulse of postcolonial historical production.<sup>75</sup> This dissertation shows that far from politically uninvolved and consumed by capitalistic endeavors, Chinese migrants in Chợ Lớn engaged with French colonists on key issues of colonial governance, such as in matter of community policing and immigration regulations. On other occasions, dissatisfied merchant communities launched direct opposition campaigns to criticize French prohibitionist tariff, which in turn reshaped colonial tax policies. Hence, a focus on Chinese political involvement in Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn “drags” them out of the shadow of nation-centric history and provides us with the opportunity to revisit the collaborative dimension of colonialism and inter-ethnic relations in colonial society,<sup>76</sup> a critical angle that had long preoccupied historians of colonialism in different parts of Southeast Asia and the world, but remained to be further explored in the history of French empire in Vietnam.

As a related point leading to my second proposition, this continuing acknowledgement of Chinese migrants as meaningful historical actors will allow us to rethink what matters in the trajectory of events that constitutes the history of modern Vietnam and from whose perspectives that these indeed matter. The rise of Vietnamese nationalism is a case in point, which this

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<sup>75</sup> Pelley, “‘Barbarians’ and ‘Younger Brothers,’” p. 375.

<sup>76</sup> Some existing studies on French Indochina already tackling this collaborative dimension include Massimo Galluppi, *The Chinese in French Cochinchina and the 1906 Commission: A Study on Collaboration* (S.l.: Istituto Universitario Orientale, 1986); Christopher Goscha, “‘The Modern Barbarian’: Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh and the Complexity of Colonial Modernity in Vietnam,” *European Journal of East Asian Studies* 3, no. 1 (2004): 135–69; Peter Zinoman, *Vietnamese Colonial Republican: The Political Vision of Vũ Trọng Phụng* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014).

dissertation also tries to tackle throughout. Over more than three decades, Anglo-American scholarship on modern Vietnam attempts to challenge and unsettle a problem in its historical narratives, succinctly summarized by Jung-Fang Tsai as “the dangers of reducing all forms of resistance against colonial rule to expressions of popular nationalism.”<sup>77</sup> As a corollary, anti-Chinese nationalism, also as one form of modern nationalism and often cited by prominent nationalists in their mobilization of the revolution, is explained away in the simplistic teleology of “one thousand years of Chinese domination,” thus erasing what in fact transpired as a more sophisticated story of imperial interactions, intellectual exchanges, migratory movement, and state-building.<sup>78</sup> Even within the plural society of Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn as it was transformed into a global port city, emerging research begins to show, against the grain of dominant revolutionary narrative casting colonial society under French rule as static and oppressive, multi-level interactions between different ethnic groups that give rise to a dynamic urban history of interactions and co-existence.<sup>79</sup> This dissertation, thus, demonstrates that by looking closely at Sino-Vietnamese relations through the lens of Chinese migrants and their relations to French colonialism, we gain a renewed understanding of the intricate nature of Vietnamese nationalism beyond the teleology of resistance to foreign aggression and a mere reaction to oppressive colonial rule. Rather, inter-ethnic entanglement in a field of contested political interactions, I argue, not only shaped the contour of Sino-Vietnamese relationship, but also produced unintended

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<sup>77</sup> Munn, *Anglo-China*, p. 15.

<sup>78</sup> Liam C. Kelley, *Beyond the Bronze Pillars: Envoy Poetry and the Sino-Vietnamese Relationship*, Asian Interactions and Comparisons (Honolulu: Association for Asian Studies: University of Hawaii Press, 2005); Liam C. Kelley, “‘Confucianism’ in Vietnam: A State of the Field Essay,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 1, no. 1–2 (2006): 314–70; Woodside, *Vietnam and the Chinese Model*.

<sup>79</sup> Tracy C. Barrett, *The Chinese Diaspora in Southeast Asia: The Overseas Chinese in Indo-China*, Library of China Studies (London: Tauris, 2012); Micheline Lessard, “‘Organisons-Nous!’ Racial Antagonism and Vietnamese Economic Nationalism in the Early Twentieth Century,” *French Colonial History* 8 (2007): 171–201; Goscha, “‘The Modern Barbarian’”; Philippe M. F. Peycam, *The Birth of Vietnamese Political Journalism: Sài Gòn, 1916-1930* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

consequences. In the first chapter of this dissertation, I show how one of the most profound and deleterious effects of colonial racism is not only its discrimination against the colonized population, but its ability to deepen existing inequality and structure its governing apparatuses around this problem by pitching one race against another.<sup>80</sup> The history of the colonial rice trade, as an institution dominated by Chinese mercantile networks and one that marginalized Vietnamese participation under the tutelage of colonial capitalism reveals that anti-Chinese nationalism, rather than an inherent outgrowth of a deep-rooted and historical anti-Chinese sentiment, in actuality arose from critical issues of colonial governance, Chinese domination, and an unequal colonial economy. This chapter also further illuminates how more often than not, anticolonial nationalism, frequently cast by official historiography as a form of popular nationalism, had to feed on anti-Chinese racism as a proxy of critiquing colonial oppression and exploitation.

Working against the grain of nationalist and revolutionary historiography, this dissertation emphasizes a different set of historical periodization than what has been commonly highlighted in former meta-narratives central to Vietnamese nation-building and the anti-colonial revolution. I foreground the years, events, and periods that track key moments in French, Vietnamese, and Chinese interactions consequential for the transformation of colonial rule and Indochinese politics at large. Within this practice, I am particularly attuned to what Shelly Chan defines as “diaspora moments”, in which “rising and falling in relation to a shifting world...transform the self or group in question into an intermediary between two reified centers of power, such as national and global,

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<sup>80</sup> Some recent scholarship on colonial Vietnam has begun to explore this complex racial dynamic. See, for example, Shawn McHale, “Ethnicity, Violence, and Khmer-Vietnamese Relations: The Significance of the Lower Mekong Delta, 1757-1954,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 72, no. 2 (2013): 367–90; Michael G Vann, “Hà Nội in the Time of Cholera: Epidemic Disease and Racial Power in the Colonial City,” in Laurence Monnais and Harold J. Cook, *Global Movements, Local Concerns : Medicine and Health in Southeast Asia*, (Singapore: NUS Press, 2012), 150–70.

native and foreign, thereby generating new knowledge and agenda.”<sup>81</sup> In this dissertation, such moments of evolving “diasporic” networks in relation to global ruptures in the Nanyang and global history include the French introduction of opium state monopoly (*régie de l’opium*) (1883), the periods of prohibitionist tariff policy (1879-1899), the Chinese Revolution (1911), the Southeast Asian rice crisis (1919), and the signing of the Franco-Chinese Convention of Nanking (1935). I argue that these moments provide a valuable framework enabling us to undo many existing assumptions in modern Vietnamese history from the lens of Chinese migrants and their transnational world.

### **Structure of the Dissertation**

This dissertation consists of four substantial chapters with each representing distinct moments of local and global encounters and domains of Sino-French-Vietnamese interactions. They are thematically and chronologically organized to highlight the evolution of Chinese networks and mobile practices against dominant narratives of modern Vietnamese history that tend to privilege revolutionary times and downplay inter-ethnic elements. Furthermore, these chapters underpin the conceptual and theoretical approach to examining what I call the varying “layers” of inter-Asian interactions and moments of transformation.

Chapter 1, “Rice, Modernity, and Anti-Chinese Nationalism: The Chinese Rice Trade and Contentious Politics in Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn,” explores how Chinese monopoly of the colonial rice trade—the most critical financial mainstay of the French regime and the main index of Indochina’s prosperity—became a political, social, and economic battleground at the height of colonial modernization in southern Vietnam. Highlighting a Sino-French conflicts over tariff legislation in

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<sup>81</sup> Shelly Chan, “The Case for Diaspora: A Temporal Approach to the Chinese Experience,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 74, no. 1 (February 2015): 107–28, p. 110.

the 1870s and the outbreak of a nationwide anti-Chinese boycott in 1919, this chapter overturns the popular narrative that portrays Chinese rice merchants monolithically as ruthless and profit-driven monopolists. Instead, by focusing on the interplay of Chinese, French, and Vietnamese participation in an unequal colonial political economy, it argues that although Chinese rice merchants and their commercial networks exploited the French's ideological confusion and effectively opposed "unjust" legislations, they soon became victims themselves. Targeted by Vietnamese intellectuals, then emboldened by a new policy of Franco-Vietnamese Collaboration, Chinese migrants were collectively trapped in unprecedented ethnic tension and treated as the roots of colonial economic exploitation—a crisis that continued to unfold and shape French and Vietnamese attitudes towards this ethnic community in the subsequent periods.

Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 trace the economic and political dimensions of Chinese commercial mobility in Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn and across Asian port cities. Chapter 2, "Addicts, Gamblers, and Criminals: Underground Chinese Networks and the Making of Sino-French Relations," foregrounds the impacts of transnational Chinese opium enterprises and Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn's deep entanglement with the Southeast Asian drug trade, arguing that Chinese migrants served not only as essential local agents in Cochinchina's opium farms but also as the precipitators of inter-Asian commerce that sustained the French colonial empire. It elucidates how this duality enabled Chinese capitalists to penetrate the colonial political system and initially bypass French economic and legal structures. Even as the introduction of a state monopoly on opium put an end to the era of total Chinese control over revenue farms and distribution networks in 1883, this chapter highlights an array of persistent problems confronting the colonial state, rooted in the contradictions of colonial economic governance and its weakness in managing Chinese secret societies, as it sought, without much success, to break free from Chinese domination. As the opium



trade fueled the economic engine of a powerful Chinese-led informal economy, Chinese gambling businesses, as this chapter further demonstrates, soon contributed to French growing anxiety over its ability to manage subversive Chinese. The increasingly lucrative nature of gambling houses and corruption within the police force, however, forestalled the colonial attempt at effective policing, turning itself into an ambiguous and highly contested site of Sino-French interactions in a shadowy yet profitable economy.

Chapter 3, “Policing Mobile Subjects: Chinese Immigration, French Control, and the Limits of Technocratic Surveillance,” investigates the developments of French surveillance technologies from the twin aspects of immigration and criminality to police Chinese mobility. The chapter argues that the French attempt to control Chinese movements was at the heart of what soon became a centralized colonial intelligence apparatus that emerged since the late nineteenth century. It reveals how, in an endeavor to confront a crisis of legitimation and surging economic imperatives, the French authority tried to emulate the British model of Chinese control in the Straits Settlements but struggled to limit immigration to Sài Gòn and what it termed “Chinese illicit activities” in the colony. I argue that French surveillance systems constantly evolved to cope with the breadth and fluidity of shifting Chinese identities while navigating the colonial state’s deep-rooted dependency on a Chinese-led informal economy.

The final chapter, “To Learn, Live, and Die: Chinese Education, Hospitals, and Death Management in Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn,” shifts the analytical focus from political economy to social, cultural, and political networks and the tensions they generated. It explores a wide range of Chinese institutions with transnational ties to communities in Southeast Asia and southern China, including hospitals, schools, and mutual aid associations. This chapter elaborates on how the French colonial state at the turn of the twentieth century desired to “modernize” colonial Vietnam and how such

modernizing imperatives had to contend with negotiations and resistance from local Chinese communities whose transnational movements were being restricted and identities threatened. I discuss these persisting tensions through three concrete case studies, including the operation of the *Lycée Franco-Chinois* (Franco-Chinese High School) in Chợ Lớn, the repatriation of Chinese mortal remains to their homeland and funerary practices, and the establishments of dialect-group hospitals and the practice of Chinese medicine against the rise of colonial public health.

### Sources and Methodology

Researching the Chinese in colonial Vietnam is challenging due to the paucity of Chinese merchants' writings, and the dispersion and destruction of Chinese-language sources during the Indochinese wars. The colonial records on French Cochinchina, while providing a wide array of helpful information on Chinese communities, tend to be overwhelmingly institutional in nature and reflect the perspectives of the state, generating what Ann Stoler characterizes as a form of "epistemic anxiety" in the way they guide and structure historical analysis.<sup>82</sup> I also experienced such a challenge during my research, which further aligns with the following assessment of Wang Gungwu, the *doyen* historian of Chinese migration, regarding the availability of records on Chinese communities in Vietnam and Southeast Asia:

How were the Chinese viewed in the region? Apart from some writings in Chinese by Vietnamese officials or descendants of Chinese in Vietnam and elsewhere in the region, Southeast Asian records tell us little about them directly. The reasons for this silence are unclear. It could be that, from the point of view of the local court scribe and historian, there were too few Chinese to matter, or that they were merely traders who came and went, leaving no mark on local political and ceremonial affairs. A third reason could be that, for the period before the arrivals of Europeans, China was perceived as powerful and arrogant. Native rulers resented Chinese claims to superiority and, after the Europeans arrived, the Chinese traders

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<sup>82</sup> Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2009).

seem too eager to work for European companies; therefore, such people did not seem worthy of a place in their histories.<sup>83</sup>

To mitigate and overcome this existing problem, I spent two years tracing extensive Chinese networks through multi-archival research in Vietnam, Singapore, and southern China. During the first phase of this research, to find more general and macro-perspectives on Chinese involvement in transnational trade, global and local economic situations, and their interactions with colonial institutions, I examined over twenty French, Vietnamese, and Chinese newspapers from roughly 1865 to 1930 and compilations of local histories. The colonial records in Ho Chi Minh City's Vietnam National Archive, Center II and the special collections in the Vietnam National Library, focusing on administrative correspondence, colonial intelligence reports on ethnic conflicts and tension, and dossiers relating to Chinese-centered economic and political activities and French overseas development in Singapore and Hong Kong, form the core materials presented in this dissertation. Additionally, I also use a wide range of French-language periodicals and collected a variety of trade, migration, and demographic statistics, as well as colonial decrees and ordinances. As Wang Gungwu mentions above, there is a distinct lack of Chinese perspectives (with some prominent exceptions from the administrative archives such as in the case of testimonies, petitions, and letters to the state) due to the non-existence of a coherent body of papers or systematic records on aspects of Chinese migrant communities in Chợ Lớn that record their social and cultural lives. Because of this, I take a piecemeal and extractive approach by also paying attention to micro-interactions in French and Vietnamese newspapers, gazetteers, and travelogues.

To make sense of inter-Asian mobility in the colonial context and the extent of inter-imperial practices, my dissertation foregrounds a novel approach to the colonial archives, what I

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<sup>83</sup> Gungwu Wang, *Don't Leave Home: Migration and the Chinese* (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 2001), p. 59.

term “reading French colonialism in British archives and reading British colonialism in the French archives.” As my research demonstrates, colonial Vietnam’s connections with the Nanyang world were enduring and ubiquitous not only in the colonial records, but also in the realm of consumptive print capitalism. These inherent linkages reinforce the imperative of using the extensive holdings in Singapore as a kaleidoscopic lens into the history of Vietnam and vice versa. My research ultimately suggests that to study the emergence of Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn as a global port city with its understudied Chinese communities requires a rigorous and systematic engagement with the British colonial and Chinese resources in Singapore. Informed by such a methodology, I utilize a wide range of documents in the Straits Settlement Records and English-language newspapers in the Singapore newspapers collection that belonged to the National Library of Singapore to better capture the scope of Chinese networks beyond Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn. Attuned to the making of Chinese cultural corridors across maritime Southeast Asia, I also explored Chinese and British newspapers published in semi-colonial China to gathered remittance, migration, and economic statistics.

## **CHAPTER I**

### **Rice, Modernity, and Anti-Chinese Nationalism: The Chinese Rice Trade and Contentious Politics in Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn**

*“I am one-half Chinese and one-half French:  
As neither fish nor fowl, what should I do?  
I’d till the soil but don’t know how to plow.  
I’d hold high office but have flunked from school.  
I’d buy and sell but run quite short of cash.  
I’d ply some trade but haven’t learned a skill.  
Well, I’ll put up with being such a flop.  
This flop’s worth more than all of you, rank knaves!”*

—Nguyễn Hữu Chu, “Neither Fish nor Fowl.”

“Neither Fish nor Fowl” is a nineteenth-century poetic exasperation of the colonial condition.

<sup>1</sup> One might characterize it as a Vietnamese indignation over the colonial *status quo* and a desperate yearning for social changes. Perceiving the unfair system of French and Chinese domination as the root cause of native ignorance, the poet Nguyễn Hữu Chu proclaimed his dignity in the face of a failed system that purported to uplift him. The conditions that Chu ruminated on in his sentimental outcry—the lack of agricultural and trade skills, and indigenous access to land and economic resources—would soon coalesce into a collective critique of one of the most important institutions of the Indochinese colonial economy in the years to come: Chinese monopoly of the rice trade and its implications for the future of colonial economic development.

Since the mid-nineteenth century, the Chinese rice trade became the cornerstone of colonial capitalism as an expanding global French empire began to consolidate its foothold in Southeast Asia. A major index of colonial prosperity and the foundation of transnational Chinese capitalism, the rice trade transformed the port city of Sài Gòn into an international entrepot and weaved it in

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<sup>1</sup> Huỳnh Sanh Thông, *An Anthology of Vietnamese Poems, From the Eleventh through the Twentieth Centuries*, (New Haven: Yale University Press: 1996), p. 107.

an integral network of global commerce.<sup>2</sup> Prior to the onset of World War II, colonial Vietnam rose to prominence as the third largest global rice exporter after Siam and Burma, making it an illuminating example of “Asian modernity at work.”<sup>3</sup> With Chinese rice merchants at the forefront of imperial mercantilism, this trade was a vital force that affirmed the position of Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn since the mid-nineteenth century as an epicenter of maritime modernity linking the Mekong Delta “water frontiers” to other commercial emporia in the vast water shared by southern China and Southeast Asia that historian of the *longue durée* Denys Lombard theorizes as “an Asian Mediterranean.”<sup>4</sup>

Yet, beyond its importance as a marker of interconnectedness and ethnic Chinese capitalism that have been frequently explored in the literature, rice, as “a product of a remarkable web of interrelated processes” in the words of David Biggs, had significant but oft-overlooked cultural and political implications in French Cochinchina.<sup>5</sup> Transnational Chinese rice commerce, rooted

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<sup>2</sup> Li Tana, “Rice Trade in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Century Mekong Delta and its Implication,” in *Thailand and Her Neighbors (II): Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia*, ed. Thanet Arpornsuwan (Bangkok: Thammasat University Press), pp. 198-214. For a relevant pre-colonial history that offer important insights into the making of the Chinese trade, see also Tana Li, *Nguyễn Cochinchina: Southern Vietnam in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Southeast Asia Program Publications, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> Christopher E. Goscha, *The Penguin History of Modern Vietnam* (London, UK: Allen Lane, Penguin Books, 2016), p. 162.

<sup>4</sup> Nola Cooke and Tana Li, eds., *Water Frontier: Commerce and the Chinese in the Lower Mekong Region, 1750-1880*, World Social Change (Singapore: Lanham, MD: Singapore University Press; Rowman & Littlefield, 2004). Li argues that the flotillas of Chinese ocean-going junks that traded down to the Mekong Delta by accessing its vast riverine systems linking Cambodia, the Transbassac, and the South China Sea (Nanyang) should be viewed conceptually as a contiguous maritime region called “water frontier.” In this sense, Chinese traders were critical players in the making of the intra-Asian trade networks in the precolonial periods, which lay a concrete economic foundation for subsequent colonial developments in the nineteenth century. On the concept of “an Asian Mediterranean,” see Denys Lombard, “Another ‘Mediterranean’ in Southeast Asia,” *The Asia-Pacific Journal, Japan Focus*, Volume 5, Issue 3 (March 2007), pp. 1-13. In this translation by Nola Cooke, the *longue durée* historian Denys Lombard draws on the similarities between the contact zone of South China Sea and southern China, and the Mediterranean. He further sketches out the possibilities of expanding potential analyses on this region from this geo-spatial perspectives.

<sup>5</sup> David Biggs, “Promiscuous Transmission and Encapsulated Knowledge: A Material-Semiotic Approach to Modern Rice in the Mekong Delta,” in Francesca Bray et al., *Rice: Global Networks and New Histories*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 118. Peter A. Coclanis argues against the orthodox thesis that often cast global rice commerce as a product of pushed integration in the advent of colonial capitalism in “Southeast Asia’s Incorporation into the World Rice Market: A Revisionist View,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 24, no. 2 (1993): 251–67.

in centuries-old networks of the junk trade efflorescence and Nanyang Chinese migration, represented the crisscrossing tensions between Chinese economic predominance, the imperatives of colonial capitalism, and indigenous desires for economic autonomy. Enabled by the deprivation of native initiatives and the reliance on “essential” economic middlemen as a consistent feature of the colonial economic structure, a system of Chinese rice monopoly emerged, upset the foundation of the colonial profit accumulations, and radicalized an indignant native population who resented colonial rule and Chinese roles in it. Consequently, as a domain of inter-ethnic interaction and a transformative agent in the urban “plural society” of Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn, the rice trade exposed the built-in structural inequality of colonial capitalism and, in turn, generated key racial, social, and economic tensions that came to define Franco-Chinese-Vietnamese relations in the first half of the twentieth century.

This chapter with a focus on the Chinese rice trade demonstrates how Chinese rice monopoly and the political struggles that ensued between French hegemony and Vietnamese resistance transformed the sociocultural milieu of Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn as it turned into a center of colonial economic modernity and inter-ethnic contestations. Transcending the material centrality that persistently shapes our knowledge about this trade, I elucidate the interplay of three main historical actors—Chinese rice merchants, French colonists, and Vietnamese colonial subjects—and their co-participation in a contentious political field that not only configured Chinese migrants’ relationship to the colonial state but also embroiled them in a hotchpotch of racial tensions consequential for colonial politics and inter-Asian interaction at the turn of the twentieth century.

As it thrust Sài Gòn into a productive venue of global capitalism and traversed an extensive commercial sphere constituted by the Sài Gòn-Hongkong-Singapore emporia (Figure 4), the Chinese rice trade offered key insights into the repercussions of globalization and its on-the-ground

impacts on the colonial society. This chapter explores the interactive forces that shaped the sociopolitical landscape of colonial Sài Gòn, as the heart of colonial wealth, where a crucial trade in the hand of a community of “foreign Asians”, was both facilitated and hamstrung by the fragile and incoherent economic foundation of empire.<sup>6</sup> It explicates how Chinese involvement in this trade became a force to be reckoned with to French policy-makers and a centerpiece of nationalist discontent to a growing educated Vietnamese public who perceived the Chinese rice monopoly as an intrusion upon Vietnamese economic sovereignty.

This chapter begins by examining the rise of the twin cities of Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn under an intensively modernizing French colonial state and its dependence on Chinese rice monopoly. It then turns to the political frictions arising out of the contradictions between the French administration and Chinese merchants in the colonial city, which revealed a noted confrontational moment that first shaped Franco-Chinese relationship. On this foundation, the chapter proceeds to exploring in depth the cultural and political impacts of the rice trade on inter-ethnic relations that involved Vietnamese colonial subjects as an emergent contender by revisiting the uproarious 1919 anti-Chinese boycotts that first exploded in Sài Gòn and inspired a significant following in other urban centers in Indochina.

### **Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn: Structure of the Chinese and Colonial Rice Commerce**

Historian Thomas Engelbert aptly describes the city of Chợ Lớn as the rice capital of colonial Cochinchina not only because of the existing social and commercial structures conducive to efficient business-making established by its Chinese inhabitants, but also of the speedy

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<sup>6</sup> *Asiatiques Etrangères* per French legal terminology.



urbanization of Sài Gòn, making it among the most important maritime *entrepôts* and center of commerce in the Mekong-Delta trading emporium.<sup>7</sup>

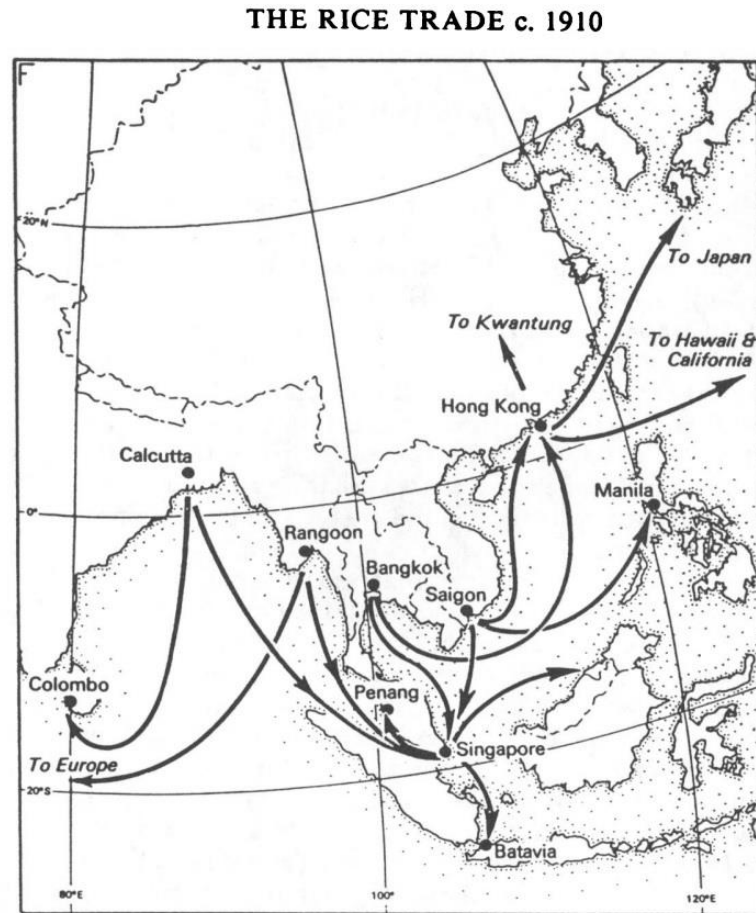
The so-called “modern” development of Sài Gòn as a port city began with intensive hydraulic projects to better facilitate colonial control and to access the more remote parts of the south as a new colonial administration was put in place to supervise the construction of the complex canal networks connecting the coastal cities to the hinterlands, and the waterways of the Mekong Delta. According to the Director of Interior, Paulin Vial, who monitored this early phase of public works already underway two years prior to the conquest, the feverishness with which infrastructural constructions were implemented reshaped the urban geography of the city and the topography of Cochinchina at large. “Two thousands of workers were employed from all parts of Cochinchina,” he wrote, “to pull the entire city out of its muddy state and, most importantly, to stimulate its function as a port authority with well-operated wharves and smooth-sailing traffic.”<sup>8</sup> This period of intensified constructions improved existing water alleys, initiated new agricultural gateways, and therefore accommodated Vietnamese settlers’ rice cultivation along these routes. The newly built canal *Arroyo Chinois* (Kênh Tàu Hũ) helped increase merchants’ mobility and the interconnectedness of maritime trade routes by providing greater access to the more distant Transbassac areas. It effectively linked the rural rice economy of *Miền Tây* to rice mills in Chợ

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<sup>7</sup> Thomas Engelbert, “Chinese Politics in Colonial Sài Gòn: The Case of the Guomindang,” *Chinese Southern Diaspora Studies*, Volume 4 (2010). 96. Other notable works that highlight the making of Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn as the center of rice commerce in southern Vietnam include Nola Cooke and Tana Li, eds., *Water Frontier: Commerce and the Chinese in the Lower Mekong Region, 1750-1880*, World Social Change (Singapore : Lanham, MD: Singapore University Press ; Rowman & Littlefield, 2004); specifically on the importance of the Mekong Delta rice trade, see Son Nam, *Đất Gia Định Xưa [A History of Gia Định]*, (TP. Hồ Chí Minh: Nhà Xuất Bản Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh, 1984) and Li Tana, “Rice Trade in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Century Mekong Delta and its Implication,” in *Thailand and Her Neighbors (II): Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia*, ed. Thanet Arpornsuwan (Bangkok: Thammasat University Press), pp. 198-214.

<sup>8</sup> Paulin Vial in *Exposition Coloniale Internationale* (Paris, Indochine Française : 1931). 31-32.

Lón, and via the port of Sài Gòn to global rice-export powerhouses such as Hongkong, Canton, Singapore, Manila, Bangkok, and the Netherland East Indies.<sup>9</sup>



**Figure 4:** The Southeast Asian Rice Network, c. 1910.<sup>10</sup>

This circulatory and close-knit network of the international rice markets thereby led to exponential growth in export from Sài Gòn in the 1860-1919 period.<sup>11</sup> After the opening of the Sài Gòn port, rice, alongside with pepper, became one of the two major sources of export for the

<sup>9</sup> A. J. H. Latham and Larry Neal, "The International Market in Rice and Wheat, 1868-1914," *The Economic History Review* 36, No. 2 (1983): 260–80, p. 262.

<sup>10</sup> Cartography from A. J. H. Latham, "From Competition to Constraint: The International Rice Trade in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries," *Business and Economic History* 17 (1988): 91–102, p. 92.

<sup>11</sup> Haydon Cherry, "Down and Out in Sài Gòn: A Social History of the Poor in a Colonial City, 1860-1940," PhD Dissertation. Yale University, pp. 31-35.

colonial economy. According to statistics published by the Sài Gòn Chamber of Commerce, in 1860, approximately 58,000 tons of rice was exported to Europe and other global markets from Sài Gòn, and from 1865 to 1869, rice prices in Cochinchina achieved the highest index for export.<sup>12</sup> Only 7 years after, this number increased more than threefold to about 193,000 tons. And from the 1880s onward, Cochinchina exported annually half a million tons, accounting for an aggregated 80% of total southern Vietnam export values.<sup>13</sup>

The unprecedented boom in commercial rice export was decidedly accompanied by the consolidation of evolving Chinese communities—predominantly traders, rice millers, and go-between workers of all kinds, but also financiers and creditors—in southern Vietnam around this time.<sup>14</sup> Chinese rice commerce was consistently organized through an elaborate network of what anthropologist Clifton Barton characterizes as an urban-rural dynamic with the co-participation of urban rice merchant syndicates (centered in the city of Chợ Lớn) and village-based Chinese traders who then actively forged a linkage between Vietnamese rural society to the colonial commercial economy.<sup>15</sup> In addition to their significant contribution to the French colonization process of the Mekong Delta and its agricultural revolution, Chinese merchants, in Barton’s words, “were the channel through which much of the credit that financed these development efforts flowed and the source of the merchandise that provided the incentives for Vietnamese peasants to produce for the market economy.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Albert Coquerel, *Paddys et Riz de Cochinchine*, Lyon : A. Rey, 1911, Apendix, Tables VIII & IX.

<sup>13</sup> Nguyễn Phan Quang, *Góp thêm tư liệu Sài Gòn - Gia Định, 1859-1945* [*Further Contribution to Sài Gòn-Gia Định Documentation, 1859-1945*] (TP. Hồ Chí Minh: Nhà Xuất Bản Trẻ, 1998), p. 15-19.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Engelbert, “Chinese Politics in Colonial Sài Gòn: The Case of the Guomindang,” *Chinese Southern Diaspora Studies*, Volume 4 (2010), p. 98.

<sup>15</sup> Clifton Gilbert Barton, “Credit and Commercial Control: Strategies and Methods of Chinese Businessmen in South Vietnam.” PhD Dissertation, Cornell University, 1977.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, p. 85.

The Chinese pioneered rice-grinding technologies and owned the majority of Cochinchinese mills by the late nineteenth century. In 1876, the first mill operated by steam engine was assembled and popularized by a Chinese merchant in Chợ Lớn.<sup>17</sup> In 1906 and 1907, two influential rice mills in Chợ Lớn, the Ban Tek Guan and the Ban Hong Guan, successfully struck a deal with the British firm Messrs. Riley, Hargreaves and Co., that, in addition to providing extensive electrical installation, also “supplied the dynamo as well as the other gear.”<sup>18</sup> In a report, this Singapore-based firm claimed that their electrical engines would be “more than sufficient to run over 600 lamps and 16 candle power in addition to several arc lamps.”<sup>19</sup> It was estimated that only within the radius of Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn five out of eight rice mills in total belonged to Chinese proprietors.<sup>20</sup> Nationally, until 1911, Vietnam had a total of 30 rice mills (23 in Sài Gòn and the six southern provinces, 6 in Tonkin, and 1 in Tourane) and 24 of these (accounting for 80%) were Chinese-owned. In terms of productivity, due to technological innovations and possessions of rice factories that outnumbered the French, Chinese mills reached an efficiency level minimally from 500 to a maximum of 1200 tons per day.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Trần Khánh, *Người Hoa trong Xã Hội Việt Nam: Thời Pháp Thuộc và dưới Chế Độ Sài Gòn* [Ethnic Chinese in the Vietnamese Society: under French Domination and the Sài Gòn Regime] (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Khoa Học Xã Hội, 2002), p. 217.

<sup>18</sup> “Rice Mill Electric Installation,” *The Straits Times*, January 15, 1907, NewspaperSG, NLB.

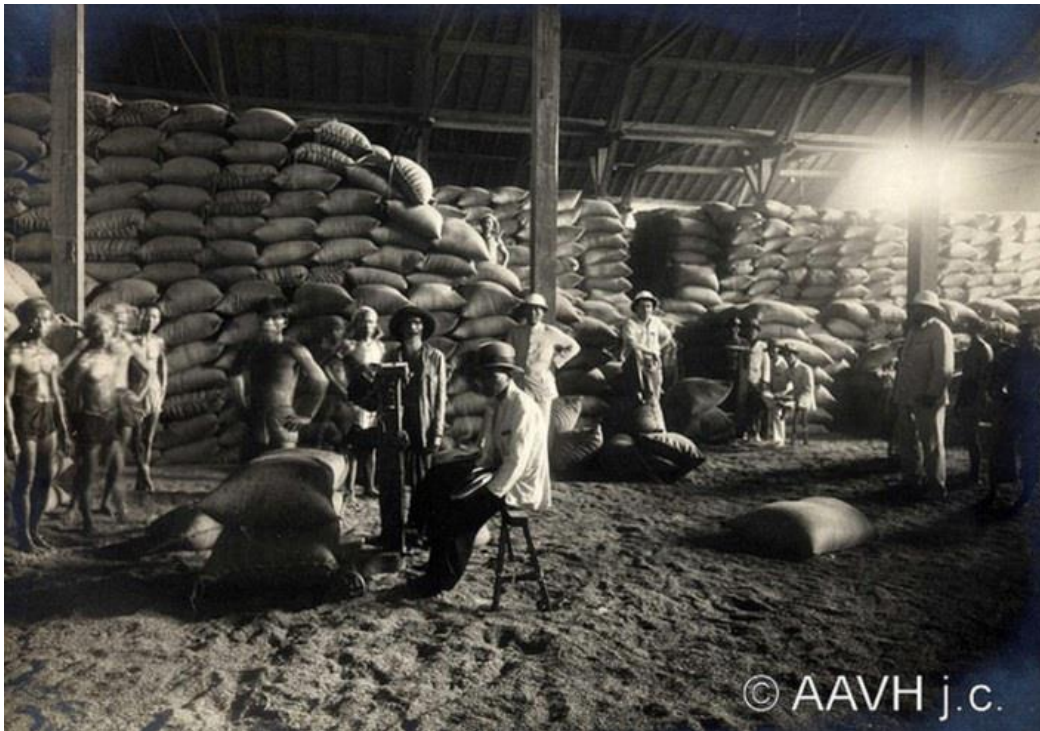
<sup>19</sup> “A Fine Electrical Installation at Chợ Lớn,” *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, January 16, 1907, NewspaperSG, NLB.

<sup>20</sup> Sơn Nam, *Đất Gia Định Xưa* [A History of Gia Định], (TP. Hồ Chí Minh: Nhà Xuất Bản Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh, 1984), p. 120.

<sup>21</sup> Trần Khánh, *Người Hoa trong Xã Hội Việt Nam*, p. 219.



**Figure 5:** Rice Junks on the Arroyo Chinois in Chợ Lớn



**Figure 6:** Inside a Rice Mill in Chợ Lớn, c. 1920  
*Source: L'Association des Amis du Vieux Hué*  
 (AAVH)

Chinese compradors in Chợ Lớn monopolized the rice export sector, not only in terms of equipment, transportation networks, and rice mills, but also early access to young grains (*lúa non*) from Vietnamese farmers. Annually, around the month of December, Chợ Lớn's mills sent out armies of agents who scouted the interior of Cochinchina to look for junks. Each of these junks was managed by Chinese overseers to whom the millers lent money in order to procure paddies. These “bosses” served as proactive and persuasive middlemen whom, with the accompaniment of local partners, tried to develop a congenial relationship with Vietnamese farmers to buy their crop in the best conditions. Such close connections with the local farming populations and landlords (*Điền Chủ*) as well as their in-depth knowledge of the Mekong Delta’s rice geography through the use of intermediary agents enabled Chinese rice merchants in Chợ Lớn to purchase grains at a much lower rate remotely from farmers by paying them a small deposit (or advances) on an agreed collecting date with much lower contracted pricing. Contracts like these often required very high interest rates, ranging from 30% to 40%.<sup>22</sup> Once a harvest concluded, the farmers had to honor this contract and sell grains to merchants before they were transported to rice mills in the city. As this cycle continued, the intermediary merchants and rice-mill owners made the most profits. Under the conditions of hefty colonial taxation, loans’ high interest rates, and inaccessibility to fluctuating market prices, Vietnamese farmers must keep selling grains to the Chinese and borrow them credits to offset production costs in order to survive till the next harvesting seasons.<sup>23</sup> H.L Jammes, in *Souvenir du Pays d’Annam*, painted a vivid picture of Chinese countryside agents’ operation:

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<sup>22</sup> Nguyễn Văn Nghi, *Etudes Economique sur la Cochinchine Française*, (Montpellier : Impr. Firmin et Montane, 1920), pp. 53-54. BNF.

<sup>23</sup> Scholars have elaborated on the Vietnamese farmers’ uninformed decisions to engage in grain sales with Chinese rice dealers as the consequence of Chinese monopoly. During the colonial period, many Chinese brokers concealed market prices, as a widespread practice, only to publicly declare them right before or after a principal market was closed. This left farmers even more vulnerable to the unpredictability of price oscillations. The French colonial government was fully aware of this profit-extracting “malpractice”; on occasions they attempted

The Chinese grain buyers, settles, in the four arms of a river on a comfortable boat, slinging a bag of piastres in one hand and a game of *baquan* in the other, patiently waiting for the customers, resting assured that the ‘fish will bite the bait’. As soon as rice starts to turn yellow, Chinese agents march through the villages, baiting the farmers by ringing his bags of coins...The Chinese is then ready to offer his advances. If the Annamite is unable to repay loans at maturity, the Chinese will pay on his rice crop he will count at a price much lower than its real value. Credit is, for the Chinese, a powerful means of exploiting the Annamese farmers because they are always short of funds. They have a compulsory expenditure every year: it is the payment of their taxes. Chinese creditors are at their disposal to provide such necessary funds. At the present, the harvest loans granted to the native through provincial chiefs and guaranteed by the government are only authorized to allow them, in the event of a bad harvest, to pay the taxes in arrears. The paperwork hinders farmers who often prefer to deal with Chinese creditors despite the 12% monthly interest rate. This is a minimum rate, recognized by the Annamese law and accepted by the French Courts in Cochinchina. To dissolve of their debts, augmented by these fabulous interests, the unfortunate Annamese peasants must submit their property titles in place of securities that constitutes a mortgage in the hands of the creditor. If the Annamese do not pay their debt, the Chinese will seize their harvest at a record low price.<sup>24</sup>

If the process of grain collections was executed with Chinese exclusive relationships to rural rice farmers in the Mekong Delta, international shipping too was handled predominantly by Chinese firms. Chinese rice mills in Hong Kong imported primarily Sài Gòn’s rice and further processed these grains to develop a more standard grading conducive to Hong Kong’s importance as a global distributor. As Hong Kong and Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn developed an interlinked rice circuit where Chinese capitalists benefitted on both sides, there was no need for a grading standardization system to develop in southern Vietnam, which significantly lowered the global market prices for Sài Gòn’s rice and rendered local rice mills in Vietnam largely a function of mass production and commercialization. The neglect of grain and rice storage quality was acutely reflected in commercial approaches to shipping, which entailed the standard practice of “milling on arrival”

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to crack down on it by taking advantage of modern telegraphic technology to send pricing information to the chiefs of towns where it was mandatorily posted in the marketplace. However, many Chinese preempted this move using their personal connections with these chiefs or the local farmers to convince them to sell grains early. For the most extensive treatment of this point, see chapter “the Monoculture of rice” in Pierre Brocheux, *The Mekong Delta: Ecology, Economy, and Revolution, 1860-1960*, Monograph / University of Wisconsin-Madison. Center for Southeast Asian Studies, no. 12 (Madison, WI, USA: Center for Southeast Asian Studies, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1995), p. 67.

<sup>24</sup> Jammes, H.L., *Souvenir du Pays d’Annam*, (Paris : A. Challamel, 1900). BNF.

that meant credits would be opened in a Sài Gòn's bank by rice millers once they received orders from abroad, but rice would not be processed until the ships arrived in Chợ Lớn.<sup>25</sup> This, combined with the surprising absence of an established freight insurance industry in colonial Vietnam, shifted the burdens of taxes and unanticipated risks (such as shipwrecks or harvest failures) to the importers, not milling parties. Disregard for rice quality, and the absence of protection and a grade reference system were structured around one goal, as Li Tana succinctly puts it, "exporting as much rice as possible."<sup>26</sup> According to Ellen Tsao's estimates, Chinese export accounted for roughly 70% of the rice shipping business, controlling the major sectors of the Hong Kong, Manilla, and Singapore markets. Conversely, this left European firms a much smaller portion of market share, primarily dealing with France, the United States, Cuba, and Japan.<sup>27</sup>

The Chinese, therefore, controlled both the sources of grains, rice mills that made grains exportable, and export networks.<sup>28</sup> Pierre Brocheux describes their system as a "pyramid of dependency" characterized by the creation of a usurious market dominated by Chinese and Indian money-lenders as the colonial commercialization of land and expensive infrastructural building diminished available credits for agricultural initiatives.<sup>29</sup> The Bank of Indochina (Banque de l'Indochine), the major financial engine created by the colonial state to issue the colony's currency and fund various developmental projects, was least interested in lending credits to small farmers, who ironically made up the majority of the manufacturing workforce but rather mid-and-large-

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<sup>25</sup> M. Rolland Président de la Chambre de Commerce à Monsieur le Lieutenant-Gouverneur de la Cochinchine, 20 July 1893, GOUCOCH L.13 N5554, TTLTQG-II, HCMC. This exchange, to be revisited later, documented in detail French complaints about Chinese omission of the quality control procedures in processing grains.

<sup>26</sup> Li Tana, "Sài Gòn's Rice Export and Chinese Rice Merchants from Hong Kong, 1870s-1920s" in Thomas Engelbert, eds., *Vietnam's Ethnic and Religious Minorities: A Historical Perspective*, (Peter Lang: 2016), p. 33.

<sup>27</sup> Ellen Tsao, "Chinese Rice Millers and Merchants in French Indochina," *Chinese Economic Journal*, No. 6, December 1932, pp. 460-461.

<sup>28</sup> Nguyễn Đức Hiệp, *Sài Gòn Chợ Lớn: Qua Những Tư Liệu Quý Trước 1945 [Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn: Pre-1945 Rare Documents]* (TP. Hồ Chí Minh: Nhà Xuất Bản Văn Hoá-Văn Nghệ, 2016), p. 299.

<sup>29</sup> Brocheux, *The Mekong Delta*, p. 70.



sized landowners whose profits remained complicatedly attached to Chinese-owned rice mills in Chợ Lớn and the exploitation of Vietnamese farmers. The Bank, as Gerard Sasges and Scott Cheshier argue, served a crucial function that was “to leverage Chinese rather than French capital, diverting Chinese investments toward French.”<sup>30</sup>

The urbanization of colonial Sài Gòn, in which the rice trade played a critical role, drew in streams of Chinese and Vietnamese migrant labor flocking from the countryside to the city to seek new economic opportunities. The colonial export economy and the thriving of the Mekong Delta trade reshaped the economic landscape of Sài Gòn in the early twentieth-century by initiating new demands for jobs in production, transportation, and service industries.<sup>31</sup> As a result, as the overall population of the city grew exponentially, the number of Chinese in Chợ Lớn also skyrocketed, marking their increasing economic and social visibility in Sài Gòn. A demographic survey indicated that by 1919, there were an estimated 101,427 Chinese in Chợ Lớn (accounting for about 37.3% of the total population of metropolitan Sài Gòn), an almost 21% increase in its population from 1907.<sup>32</sup>

The globalized economy of colonial Sài Gòn, now dependent on the Chinese rice trade networks and French colonial developments that facilitated their evolution, engendered new problems as Sài Gòn transformed into a cosmopolitan hub. The Chinese’s experiences with the “bulk goods” trade in the Mekong Delta, including their monopoly of the rice trade and the junk networks that enabled their business dominance, as well as their hyper-visibility in these domains posed new political dilemmas. Tension rooted in the French turn to “protectionism”—and hence

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<sup>30</sup> Gerard Sasges and Scott Cheshier, “Competing Legacies: Rupture and Continuity in Vietnamese Political Economy,” *South East Asia Research* 20, No. 1 (March 1, 2012): 5–33, p. 16.

<sup>31</sup> Nguyễn Cẩm Thủy, *Định cư của người Hoa trên đất Nam Bộ: từ thế kỷ XVII đến năm 1945* [*Chinese Settlement in Southern Vietnam: From the Seventeenth Century to 1945*] (Hà Nội: Khoa Học Xã Hội, 2000), pp. 36-37.

<sup>32</sup> Nguyễn Phan Quang, *Góp thêm tư liệu Sài Gòn - Gia Định, 1859-1945* [*Further Contribution to Sài Gòn-Gia Định Archives, 1859-1945*] (TP. Hồ Chí Minh: Nhà Xuất Bản Trẻ, 1998), pp. 50-51.

rigorous regulation of the Chinese rice trade—and its impending collision with the business interests of Chinese merchants continued to unfold and define this period of radical imperial reformulation of its economic ideology and approach toward colonization starting in the 1870s.

### **Franco-Chinese Encounter: Chinese and French Rice Merchants and the Tariff Legislative Battles of the 1880s**

On Jan 12, 1886, a Chinese rice merchant was caught red-handed by the French customs police while loading rice cargoes onto junks before heading for southern China in his home village of Binh An in the Mekong Delta. The man's name was Trương Duy Hòa (張惟和) and he was fined a handsome sum of 50 piastres for a smuggling attempt. This episode, as later recalled by a secret police agent, created a commotion throughout his entire coastal village. "The industrious and honest villagers of Bình An," this police officer explained, "were taken aback by the 'unusual' arrestation." But Trương Duy Hòa was not alone in finding the charge absurd; his petition to the Gouverneur General revealed a seemingly earnest confession: he too was shocked by the indictment, insisting that he was simply taking rice from Chinese junks and then selling it to markets in Sài Gòn along with his friend Mạc Bảo Trí. In desperation, he asserted, "I was just doing what I do every day for a living. I do not have what custom police officers asked of me, either registration or paperwork (giấy thông hành). In our village and in Gò Công, we do not deal with rice millers using anything categorically labeled 'giấy thông hành'."<sup>33</sup>

This unexpected encounter captures an on-the-ground administrative confusion and signifies an emerging phase of French intensified protectionist attitude towards the existing rice trade long

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<sup>33</sup> Correspondence, Report from Mr. Bes d'Albaret, Provincial Chief of Go-Cong to the Director of Interior in Sài Gòn, Jan 12, 1886, *Sở Thương Chánh Nam Kỳ* (STCNK) [The Southern Ministry of Commerce] 687, Vietnam National Archive, Center II (TTLTQG-II), HCMC.

dominated by Chinese junk traders and merchants of large and small scales. In a recent work on the Canton rice trade, historian Seung-Joon Lee underscores how new regulatory regimes give rise to the political contestations “over two different forms of knowledge between the modern Chinese state and the Cantonese Rice merchants who dominated the transnational rice trade throughout the South China Sea.”<sup>34</sup> As a solution to persisting food deficiency in Canton, the Republican Chinese government imposed new economic measures on rice trading and consumption on the ground of quantitative scientific methods to mitigate Canton’s recurring food crisis. However, this disastrous move, entailing prohibitory tariffs, proposed changes in diet, and the modernization of rice production, disrupted existing commercial practices long employed by Chinese merchants who relied on accumulative local knowledge and spider-webbed economic networks to develop the rice consumer market in early twentieth-century China.

I argue that a similar dynamic occurred at the onset of the robust growth of the Cochinchinese rice trade between a French colonial state ravenous for rice exports and an increasingly powerful commercial conglomeration made up by the alliances of Chinese strongmen—or cosmopolitan capitalists<sup>35</sup>—and their advocates (Chinese congregational leaders). Their commercial rivalries reflected a peculiar “cultural politics of colonial rule”—what George Steinmetz theorizes as a competition for “the dominant forms of domination” that reinforced French colonists’ role as the beacon of lawfulness and as proper upholder of the *mission civilisatrice*.<sup>36</sup> In this tense moment of Sino-French debates, Chinese political oppositions pushed back against French ambition to seize an authoritative control of the Chinese rice trade. Such an engagement with colonial politics

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<sup>34</sup> Seung-Joon Lee, *Gourmets in the Land of Famine: The Culture and Politics of Rice in Modern Canton* (Stanford University Press, 2011), p. 100.

<sup>35</sup> Gary G. Hamilton, ed., *Cosmopolitan Capitalists: Hong Kong and the Chinese Diaspora at the End of the 20th Century* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999).

<sup>36</sup> George Steinmetz, “Social Fields, Subfields and Social Spaces at the Scale of Empires: Explaining the Colonial State and Colonial Sociology,” *The Sociological Review Monographs* 64, no. 2: 98–123.

exposed the weaknesses and unpreparedness of French commercial policies, and reoriented their approach to dealing with Chinese merchants not only as economic intermediaries but also political subjects.

In a public address to the Governor General of Cochinchina on October 16, 1873, the chairman of the Sài Gòn Chamber of Commerce, M. Dierx, expressed grave concerns about the future of French commerce and the colony's potential contributions to greater France. "Notwithstanding the energy, the perseverance, and the intelligent efforts of our merchants," he confessed, "we have witnessed during the past four years the disappearance of more than ten houses, who were engaged in importation and exportation in Sài Gòn."<sup>37</sup> A worrying administrator who condemned what he saw as the merely "apparent" and transient wealth of the colony that "subordinated" itself to Chinese economic foundation, Dierx plead to the colonial governor as well as the metropolitan French government to heed carefully the "Chinese element" because, "as a very sad truth in its present state, Cochinchina is a colony for Chinese and foreigners."<sup>38</sup>

Dierx's address overlapped with the advent of a rice export boom in Cochinchina characterized by upward trends in both trade volumes and values. In 1886, for example, export remained higher than ever in the face of crop deficiency, rising to a total of 3,480,500 tons as demands for Sài Gòn rice from Hong Kong and Manila continued to escalate. A local observer reported that "there are no stocks at Chợ Lớn, grain being shipped as fast as it arrives."<sup>39</sup> As the domestic rice market in Cochinchina was thrust deeper into the global flux and flow of international commerce, the French colonial government entrapped itself in a mutually interlocking yet seemingly self-contradictory dynamic: policing Chinese rice merchants while

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<sup>37</sup> Official Papers, *The North - China Herald and Supreme Court & Consular Gazette (1870-1941)*, Oct 16, 1873.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> "The Sài Gòn Rice Market," *Straits Time Weekly Issue*, May 6, 1886, NewspaperSG, NLB.

sustaining extant rice networks and continuing to extract gigantic revenue from them. Dierx's reflection on the deep-rooted challenges posed to European commerce set off a long debate over the extent of Chinese economic power and agency in the rice trade as arguably one of the most crucial financial mainstays of the colonial state. By implication, the practical spill-over of these power struggles remained the effort to "restore" French authority by "legally" enacting new decrees and policies that not only better cast the colonial state again as the chief benefactor of the inter-Asian rice trade, but also manage what in their view was an unruly population operating on the periphery of colonial laws. Previous warnings against French concessions to Chinese commercial operation, specifically in the domain of given state-right monopoly, were not entirely unheard of in one of these chamber's meetings. A testimony of a wary French settler perfectly captured the colonial anxiety:

Since the dawn of the occupation in 1862, the commander in chief established the right to levy a monopoly tax on the consumption of European alcohol, and appointed a Chinese collector to handle the receipts; in 1870, the local authority already having established a tax on alcohol, conceded to a Chinese the monopoly of import, fabrication, transport, and sale of rice, wine and other liquors of Asian origins...

The Chinese also became official representatives of the French administration for the sale of opium. In even the smallest villages, one saw the opening of establishments for smoking, drinking, and gambling, which were owned by the Chinese...<sup>40</sup>

In the decades leading up to the twentieth century, French observers lamented at the successive bankruptcies of European trading houses in Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn and their comparative disadvantages against those owned by Chinese merchants. On June 10, 1876, one such firm owned by German proprietors declared its foreclosure, citing financial dissolution due to the lack of market price transparency and Chinese dealers' "disinclination to lower their prices in transactions."<sup>41</sup> Repeated complaints from European merchants about their inability to have a "fair competition" with

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<sup>40</sup> Dubreuil, R., *De la Condition des Chinois et de leur Role Economique en Indochine*, (Unpublished Thesis in Law, Paris : 1910. Cited in Luong Nhi Ky. "The Chinese in Vietnam a Study of Vietnamese-Chinese Relations with Special Attention to the Period 1862-1961," PhD Dissertation, University of Michigan, 1962, p. 67.

<sup>41</sup> Sài Gòn, *The North - China Herald and Supreme Court & Consular Gazette (1870-1941)*, Jun 10, 1876.

Chinese-owned trading houses in Chợ Lớn preoccupied the Chamber of Commerce's reports. Historian Gerard Sasges, in writing about the early colonial period of French rule, also highlighted this troublesome start, attributing the underperformance of French enterprises to a combination of "incoherent economic policies" and "ideological confusion" as well as European merchants' practical lack of local knowledge and funding. The central goal of the colonial state during this period, he insists, was to generate revenues for its shrinking budget by diversifying from existing Chinese monopolies.<sup>42</sup>

Yet, diversification was no easy feat, if not virtually impossible, for a trade that had accounted for more than 60% of the entire colonial export and, in the words of Virginia Thompson, constituted "the sole product, the only article for consumption and as a medium of exchange, the condition of country's prosperity, the keystone of Indochina's economy."<sup>43</sup> In this entrenched commercial structure, Chinese merchants in Chợ Lớn and the Mekong Delta had established themselves as not only indispensable cooperators, business partners and tax-payers that enriched the colonial economy, but also as global forces linking French Indochina's regional commerce to its integral networks of East and Southeast Asian trade. The efflorescence of Chợ Lớn's rice milling industry in the whole of Cochinchina enabled a small group of wealthy Chinese merchants to rise to the top of the social pyramid and this Chinese town to function as a central node towards which major flows of grain gravitated before exportation. This included, for example, the Teochew Quách Đàm (郭琰 or also known as Kwek Siew Tee) and Vĩnh Sanh Chung, the Peranakan Hokkien Tja Ma Yeng (謝媽延), and Jean-Baptiste Hui-Bon-Hoa (黃文華) and his family. These

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<sup>42</sup> Gerard Sasges, "Scaling the Commanding Heights: The Colonial Conglomerates and the Changing Political Economy of French Indochina," *Modern Asian Studies* 49, no. 5 (September 2015): 1485–1525, 1493.

<sup>43</sup> Geoffrey C. Gunn, *Rice Wars in Colonial Vietnam: The Great Famine and the Viet Minh Road to Power*, Asia/Pacific/Perspectives (Plymouth, United Kingdom: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), p. 11.

men and their economic empires controlled a majority of the lucrative trade activities in Sài Gòn. Deriving much of their wealth from the prosperous rice trade, they diversified into auxiliary businesses that continued to draw enormous profits from the rice-export industry. Quách Đàm financed the construction of the principal market of Bình Tây with funding channeled largely from the success of his rice firm Thông Hiệp while Hui-Bon-Hoa's company, Ogliastro, Hui Bon Hoa & Co., invested in real estate and dominated the landscape of money-lending businesses in the form of pawnshops.<sup>44</sup>

As writer Vương Hồng Sển depicts in his nostalgic memoir of old Sài Gòn, when prominent Chinese merchants engaged in the rice trade, they also branched out to other industries such as real estate, constructions, and shipbuilding, extending their commercial influences and leaving their imprints onto the urban landscape of Sài Gòn.<sup>45</sup> One such Chinese commercial luminary is the “rice king of Cochinchina” and renowned capitalist Quách Đàm, whose level of material wealth and political influence was so expansive that the French colonial government granted him the coveted “Legion of Honor” title for his contributions.<sup>46</sup> Much of Quách Đàm's private life remains mysterious folktales, but stories of his commercial dexterity and fearlessness, as well as his intimate tie to the colonial government pervaded Chợ Lớn's popular consciousness. Hailed from humble origins, Quách Đàm (also known by his Chinese name Guo Yan 郭琰) allegedly hid himself as a fourteen-year-old child into a boat cabin, traveling from a small, derelict town in Chao'an county of eastern Guangdong province in China across the Nanyang to Sài Gòn in 1877. There, he took on all kinds of makeshift jobs to make ends meet: a coolie boy, a junkyard bottle

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<sup>44</sup> Thomas Engelbert, “Chinese Politics in Colonial Sài Gòn: The Case of the Guomindang,” *Chinese Southern Diaspora Studies*, Volume 4 (2010), pp. 96-97.

<sup>45</sup> Vương Hồng Sển, *Sài Gòn Năm Xưa* [Sài Gòn, Past and Present], (TP. Hồ Chí Minh: Nhà Xuất Bản Tổng Hợp Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh, 2018).

<sup>46</sup> “Echos de Indochine. Cochinchine,” *La Revue Economique d'Extrême-Orient*, 5 March, 1926, 77.

collector (*ve chai*), and a food hawker. Despite the floating and irregular nature of these jobs, Quách Đàm, with his utmost diligence, patience, and providence, accumulated significant experiences in various trade skills and saved enough money to build his rice empire from scratch. Taking advantage of the economic opportunities brought about by the French investment in the ports of Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn, he began to erect the earliest Chinese-owned rice mills in the region, hence the birth of the rice firm Thông Hiệp (Yee Cheong) then located at Quay de Gaudot. Some Chinese sources indicated that by the early twentieth century, Quách Đàm's firm had managed to accumulate such enormous capital that four additional rice mills were soon established in Hong Kong, Singapore, and Sài Gòn, which all functioned cohesively within his transnational business network and in combination generated up to 30,000 bales of rice a day, accounting for half of the Vietnamese rice export at the time.<sup>47</sup>

By the time of his death in 1927, detail of his properties and political connections became a topic of widespread public discussion through remembrances and obituaries. French journalist Georges Manue elaborately depicted Đàm's funeral as sumptuous and well-attended by Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn's highest-ranked Chinese, Vietnamese, and European elites. The rituals were sophisticated. For several days, his body was exposed under a baldachin so that Chợ Lớn's rice traders from over forty houses and coolies could march around to see him one last time and offer their libations. Once the burial period kicked in, his corpse was enclosed in beautifully crafted wooden coffin, preceded by an exorbitant chariot, and followed by "fifty luxurious cars driving around in two hours and echoing strange music." A Franco-Chinese flag was placed on top of the chariot, indicating his close relationship to the French government. On the sidewalk were crowds of Chợ Lớn Chinese residents watching the parade intently while some curiously peeked through

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<sup>47</sup> "Guo Yan: Jindai YueNan Chao Shang 郭琰近代越南朝商 [Quách Đàm: Vietnam's Chaozhou Merchant]," <http://guoyan.ren.hqcr.com>.



the windows attempting to catch a glimpse of the exuberant demonstration. Manue did not fail to seize on this “expensive” funeral as an opportunity to provide commentary: “this is an example of what a Chinese can do when he lives under a solid government that guarantees him security and opportunities.”<sup>48</sup> Posthumous celebrations of Quách Đàm’s legacies glorified his active investments in real estate and offshore properties (which included several rice mills in Hong Kong and Singapore, a sugar factory in Cambodia, and freight companies that provided services between Shantou and Sài Gòn) as well as his transformation of the Chợ Lớn’s metropolitan area.<sup>49</sup> A journalistic account indicated that Quách Đàm was ambitious in shifting the gravity of trade from the Sài Gòn’s center of *Arroyo Chinois* to the Bình Tây market area in Chợ Lớn, potentially as a means to overcome the prominence of French regulations and to effectively facilitate family-run businesses under his centralized commercial magnet.<sup>50</sup>

This overwhelming success of Chinese rice merchants in Cochinchina at the dawn of the twentieth century shares a similar narrative arc with the broader Southeast Asian Chinese diasporas in Bangkok, Singapore, and Penang. The Wang Lee rice firm founded by Tan Tsu Huang who arrived at Siam “penniless,” for instance, came to prominence in the 1900s as the proprietor of two largest rice mills in Bangkok with business networks stretched eastward to Hong Kong. Before his rice trade business kicked off, Tan successfully operated both junk and steamship services that soon dominated Siam’s early industry.<sup>51</sup> The big five—a Chinese commercial conglomerate made

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<sup>48</sup> George L.R. Manue, “Le Buddha de la Richesse [The Buddha of Wealth],” *Le Journal en Indochine*, 18 July, 1927.

<sup>49</sup> “Guo Yan : Jindai YueNan Chao Shang 郭琰近代越南朝商 [Quách Đàm: Vietnam’s Chaozhou Merchant.]”

<sup>50</sup> “Chợ Mới Bình-Tây, Đại Kỳ Mưu Của Quách Đàm [The New Market of Bình Tây, Quách Đàm’s Strategic Plot],” *Công Luận Báo* [L’Opinion], 1079, 13 September 1928, TVQGVN Newspapers Collection, Hà Nội. See also, Vương Cẩm Tú, *Sài Gòn Xưa & Nay [Sài Gòn Past & Present]*, p. 15.

<sup>51</sup> Seung-Joon Lee, “Rice and Maritime Modernity: The Modern Chinese State and the South China Sea Rice Trade” in Francesca Bray et al., *Rice: Global Networks and New Histories*, (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 99–117, p. 111.

up of families of nineteenth-century Penang, the Tan, the Yeoh, the Lim, the Cheah, and the Khoo—accumulated uncharted wealth through various industries in the Straits and achieved a high degree of “regional economic ascendancy.” As Yee Tuan Wong demonstrates, the big five and their associates put Penang’s rice import largely under their control by successfully diverting a portion of Burma’s rice, then effectively monopolized by Indian rice traders, “to the southwestern Siamese states, North Sumatra, China, and Singapore, at much profit to themselves.”<sup>52</sup> Living up to their reputation as transnational capitalists, Chinese merchants in Sài Gòn and other port cities operated in what was then known as a “Chinese rice circuit” that involved a dynamic range of inter-port interactions, which primarily defined the global nature of the rice-milling-and-exporting businesses. Evidence from French and British colonial archive suggests a close commercial relationship between Chinese merchants in Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn and Singapore. Quách Đàm, for example, was revealed to have opened up a branch of his firm Thông Hiệp at 80 Boat Quay, Singapore to serve as his point of contact and to facilitate rice trade activities there. This information did not come to light until 1923 when his British lawyer, Sir. A. De Mello, posted a public notice in the British colonial press to announce the ownership transfer of his joint-stock company to a Singaporean-Chinese merchant named Tan Eng Kwok.<sup>53</sup>

On this backdrop of the political and economic configurations in Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn, a broiling Sino-French political feud between two powerful economic groups would be unleashed with the beginning of French effort to revamp its policing apparatuses, which targeted two classic

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<sup>52</sup> Yee Tuan Wong, “The Big Five Hokkien Families in Penang, 1830s-1890s,” *Chinese Southern Diaspora Studies*, Volume 1, 2007: 106-115, 111. For the most comprehensive study of the Penang’s Big Five, see Wong Yee Tuan. *Penang Chinese Commerce in the 19th Century: The Rise and Fall of the Big Five* (Singapore: ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute, 2015).

<sup>53</sup> Notice, *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, April 24, 1923, NewspaperSG, NLB. No specific reasons were given for such transfer, but it could be deduced from George Manue’s account that Quách Đàm was gravely sick around this time and consequently bedridden. Coupled with a struggling rice market in the post-1919 Southeast Asian rice crisis, this business decision seemed to be a downsizing initiative to lessen the financial risks for his larger firm in Chợ Lớn.

regulatory intervention in *laissez-faire* economics: they sought to implement a protective tariff on rice export from the Sài Gòn's port and to impose a heavy poll-tax on "registered" Chinese trading houses. The underlying motivation for this move, besides the apparent colonial apprehension of Chinese domination of the commercial landscape, came as a response to political pressures from its constituents—European firms and lobby groups—who sought ways to compete with Chinese businesses and demand a fair share of profits from the Cochinchinese trade.

The first wave of commotion was initiated to the chamber of commerce in Sài Gòn on December 20, 1895 when a group of European rice millers, representing the Les Usiniers Français de Cochinchine (Association of French Millers of Cochinchina) sent a letter to the governor-general of the colony to voice their indignation against Chinese rice businesses. This group, including the firms Denis Frères, Rizerie Française de Sài Gòn, Rizerie à Vapeur de Chợ Lớn, and la Rizerie de L'Union, gathered together some of the most influential players in the domain of colonial trade. In this letter, they underscored the unfair nature of economic competition where Chinese merchants enjoyed total control over prices, sources of grains, and transportation; dwelled on the inevitable destruction of French trading firms in the face of Chinese monopoly, only to remind the colonial administrators of their duties to "protect French traders against this ensuing danger to the colony"; and proposed practical measures to subvert Chinese domination. This last point entailed two main demands: (1) impose an increase of five cents per hundred net kilograms on the export duties of rice and paddies for all destinations and (2) grant French factories a ten cents bonus per picul, essentially a premium to be distributed monthly by the *Service of Customs and Régie*.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Correspondence, From the Association of French Millers of Cochinchina to the Lieutenant-Governor of Cochinchina, December 20, 1895, GOUCOCH L.13 N5554, TTLTQG-II, HCMC.

M. Holbe, the Vice President of the Sài Gòn Chamber of Commerce, drafted an elaborate proposal, hoping to convince the Governor-General to adopt the new protective measure. He explained two main causes for European mills' failure in the face of fierce Chinese competition. First, he drew attention to French lack of knowledge about Chinese factories. "Nobody knows exactly what happens there and how they do it," he laments as he proposes a surveillance program to develop a comparative table of the operating costs of Chinese factories compared to European ones, arguing that "we need to inform ourselves of their operations." Yet, he maintained that European traders lost their control mainly over the rural rice market, where most of grains were supplied and delivered directly to Chinese rice mills in Chợ Lớn. Second, he justified the proposed premium by contending that European traders spent too much on labor and transportation costs to deliver the exact amount of rice compared to the Chinese. Ultimately, he suggested that Chinese country-agents outperformed European traders due to their access to local connections and illicit businesses.<sup>55</sup>

Protective tariffs played a central role in the French colonial government's effort to curb Chinese monopolistic power and regulate the international rice trade to maneuver revenue flows in its favor. But to further understand the colonial urge to impose high tariff on the rice trade (private trade at large), we need to contextualize it in the broader ideological and practical framework of French imperial statecraft by the late nineteenth century. Irene Norlund describes French economic policies starting in the 1880s as "one dominated by protectionism."<sup>56</sup> This means consciously systematic efforts on the part of the colonial state to "raise protective tariffs against foreign rice in mother country, but also to reduce export duties in Cochinchina for rice going to

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<sup>55</sup> M. Holbe, Vice-Président de la Chambre de Commerce à Monsieur le Gouverneur de la Cochinchine, GOUCOCH L.13 N5554, TTLTQG-II, HCMC.

<sup>56</sup> Irene Nørlund, *The French Empire: The Colonial State in Vietman and the Economic Policy 1885-1940* (Copenhagen: University of Copenhagen Press, 1989). 73.

France.”<sup>57</sup> Ever since the confirmation of a general tariff law in 1892 known as the “Mélinae Tariff,” the French modified its duties on rice upwardly a total of eight times between 1879 and 1899; such repeated manipulations of tariffs were meant to direct trade revenues toward France and to stifle Chinese monopoly.<sup>58</sup> As long-time participant in the Asian rice trade, contemporaneous British observers followed French protectionist policies with watchful eyes. Sir. Alex Gentle, the secretary of the Singapore Chamber of Commerce, reported with anxieties to the colonial secretary of the Straits Settlement that additional French duties would have a prohibitory effect on the Singapore-Sài Gòn trade and “unless some modification or abatement can be procured, the flourishing trade between us will be destroyed.”<sup>59</sup> Commenting on the newly introduced tariff, a British writer cynically characterized French protectionism as myopic and impractical:

The protectionist feeling, so strong in France, shows itself among the French colonists in French Cochinchina by increasing antagonism to Chinese trade rivalry there. The colony was acquired to benefit French political and commercial ends, and the port of Sàì Gòn, at the outset, was with that intent made free of import and export duties. But French commercial enterprise lagged behind foreign competition, until importations of foreign goods grew so considerable that a protective tariff against them was introduced [...] On the other hand, the resulting exclusion of the Chinese from membership (of the Chamber of Commerce) is hailed with satisfaction by the colonists. The president of the Chamber of Commerce rejoiced at it, and declared in favour of stronger measures to curb Chinese commercial influence in the colony. That influence is alleged to have prevailed by Chinese ousting Frenchmen from profitable lines of business [...] The sore point is that Chinese acuteness and business aptitudes have as successfully asserted themselves in Sàì Gòn as in other Far Eastern ports, and the French colonists cannot brook alien swiftness thus winning in the commercial race for wealth [...] The commercial protection seems to lie in keeping the Chinese in a subordinate position, and in not allowing them to rise beyond certain bounds. Such a policy runs counter to experience in this quarter of the world, where the Chinese are found an indispensable factor in developing backward countries. However, a French experiment, in trying to do without any great Chinese aid in this respect, will prove interesting. Its failure, we fancy, is foredoomed.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Norman G. Owen, "The Rice Industry in Mainland Southeast Asia," *The Journal of Siam Society*, Vol. 59, part II, July 1971, 113.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> "Correspondence between Alex Gentle, Secretary of the Singapore Chamber of Commerce, to the Colonial Secretary of the Straits Settlement Regarding Differential Duties on Singapore's Export Goods to Sàì Gòn Imposed by the French," *Singapore Chamber of Commerce Annual Report*, 1887-1894, National Archive of Singapore (Hereafter NAS).

<sup>60</sup> "Protection Against Chinese," *The Straits Times*, 18 March 1896, NewspaperSG, NLB.

On December 21, 1895, the Sài Gòn Chamber of Commerce temporarily approved the request presented by French manufacturers to obtain a premium for the future of their industry threatened by the Chinese. Backed by the chamber's leaders, French merchants requested the Lieutenant-General Governor's willingness to grant them in the circumstance the most benevolent support of his high authority. French traders came prepared with the year's trade volume statistics, which showed that the total of rice produced in European factories only accounted for one-fifth of total export output of Cochinchina from 1 January to 28 December 1895. To be sure, while this data could be exaggerated to intentionally reinforce European's competitive disadvantages, their concerns for Chinese competition were not wholly ungrounded.<sup>61</sup> The *Courier de Sài Gòn* indicated that by May 1899, French enterprises were "hopelessly distanced by Chinese rice mills" as only two French-owned ones were left to compete with eight Chinese factories. While French mills were being actively phased out, more and more Chinese mills were established at an increasing rate with extended investments and machine parts imported from Singapore valuing at about one million piastres.<sup>62</sup> On 13 March 1899, a record land sale was made successful via auction in Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn. In a fierce bidding competition, a wealthy European syndicate who fought to buy a piece of land of about 10 meters of river frontage and 190-meter depth to erect a rice mill was reportedly defeated by a rivaling "Chinaman" who arrived at the scene to make the exchanges lively and fiery. The land, purportedly described as a "poor-looking investment yet an essential extension to the existing machineries," was sold for a whopping price of \$28,000, among the highest property purchase to date in Cochinchina.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Correspondence, Meeting Session of the Sài Gòn Chamber of Commerce, GOUCOCH L.13 N5554, TTLTQG-II, HCMC.

<sup>62</sup> "French Indochina," *The Straits Times*, May 19, 1899. NewspaperSG, NLB.

<sup>63</sup> "Exciting Land Sale in Sài Gòn," *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser (Weekly)*, 23 March 1899. NewspaperSG, NLB.

In the event of the unanimous adoption of the new proposed tariff increase in the Chamber of Commerce, the Chinese merchant community in Chợ Lớn began to heed the political pressure that befell them. On December 30, 1892, the heads of five Chinese congregations (Canton, Fujian, Teochew, Hainan, and Hakka), on behalf of Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn's Chinese trading houses, sent a letter to the governor-general of Cochinchina to voice their grievances. In this letter, they attacked the promulgation of said underway decree of February 27, 1892 that sought to enforce stringent regulations on the Chinese trade by targeting the rice industry through tariff and high taxation. The tariff, in their views, was an affront to Chinese commercial practices with the potentials for ruining the Chinese trade. With full conviction, they demanded a public oral testimony and required judicial accommodation from the chamber by permitting the assistance of a legal advocate—a recently hired M. Bertrand—who ran a law firm in Sài Gòn and spoke French as his mother-tongue.<sup>64</sup>

Overpouring Chinese complaints led members of the Sài Gòn Chamber of Commerce to ponder seriously on their propositions behind closed doors in subsequent meetings. As the secretary of the chamber read aloud the Chinese petition, French members of the chambers heatedly debated the implications of the soon-to-be-implemented decree for the future of colonial commerce and the rice trade. French opinions were unquestionably divided. The colonial moderates attempted to block the execution of tariff by arguing against this measure, characterizing it as an unnecessary provocation of Chinese businesses. One officer exasperatedly emphasized “far from remedying an evil inherent in any trading country, it will only aggravate it by carrying a fatal blow to the colony and consequently to its prosperity while others insist on

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<sup>64</sup> Letter from the Chinese Congregations of Chợ Lớn, December 30, 1892, GOUCOCH L.0 N5522, Dossier Relatif à la Règlementation du Commerce Chinois et Activités des Congrégations Asiatiques, Années 1890-1894 [Files Related to the Regulations of Chinese Commercial Activities and Asian Congregations, 1890-94], TTLTQG-II, HCMC.

rigorous regulation that obliges Chinese merchants to custom formalities.” The autarkists—those advocating the interests of French industrialists and Cochinchina-based traders, such as the president of Chamber of Commerce himself—believed in heavy policing particularly in the domain of Chinese commercial mobility and export competitions. He delved into the necessity of re-directing the rice trade to French benefits by putting Chinese economic networks under control. As such, he attacked Chinese merchants’ lack of valid paperwork and their refusals to submit to French tax formalities by providing commercial records when inquired, hinting at the common disappearance of Chinese after endemic bankruptcies and stressing the needs to establish systemic records for Chinese trading houses in Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn. French tariffs, in this regard, served as a legal warrant to hold down Chinese accountability, an increasingly onerous challenge to be confronted by the French government in the early twentieth century. In short, by arguing that current French laws had generated too many loopholes for Chinese trading houses, these advocates for French industrialists viewed tariffs to be an effective means of reestablishing commercial order in French’s favor while continuing to benefit from the prosperous rice trade.<sup>65</sup>

Sensing unfavorable movements in the French chamber, Chinese leaders persistently took to the floor, demanding to be heard by the Chamber and asking for a decisive repeal of said decree. They also demanded that the application of this decree be postponed until the date adopted by the Chinese traders for the liquidation of their annual operation, wishing to allow trading houses in China to receive and request necessary information to settle. On March 3, 1894, merchants of small and large trading houses delivered another petition, this time boldly headlining that “we have shown passive obedience by cooperating with French administrators most of the time, but in the

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<sup>65</sup> Meeting of the Sài Gòn Chamber of Commerce, Session 321, December 29, 1893, GOUCOCH L.0 N5522, TTLTQG-II, HCMC.



present case concerning our commerce, we will not be silenced.”<sup>66</sup> Citing commercial unrests in areas where Chinese capitalists had begun to refuse “any shipments of money or merchandise” relating to Sài Gòn as a form of protest, they opposed the additional exit duties on rice export as well as the forced registration of traders’ identities and declaration of business records, claiming that “the administration knows by the control, by the registers and by the patents that we have displayed at home and by the sign of our doors; to whom it deals and to whom it is to address by the payments of our taxes.”<sup>67</sup> Most interestingly, they declared themselves the “victim of petty crimes” committed by those deplorable comrades, who are “one rotten apple that spoil the barrels.” Unlike those small traders, they had been major suppliers of the China trade and argued that they had been respecting the rule of laws. Against regulations and protectionism, they concluded: “we declare our intention to the greatest representative of the French in the Far East that businesses will be on a chokehold with the abrupt implementation of the increase in export duty, which requires further revision and reconsideration given the Chinese presence in Sài Gòn.”

In fact, Chinese resistance began not only at home in Chợ Lớn where congregational leaders sent numerous letters to the chamber of commerce to demand representation in its decision-making processes, but also in Hong Kong where the majority of Sài Gòn rice had been shipped to since 1864. During this period, Hong Kong, as a critical node of the north-south Asian rice circuit (the *Nanbei* trade), turned into a vigorous commercial battleground among Sài Gòn and Hongkong-based Chinese merchants and the French authority. Due to the increasing volume of the rice trade between the two port cities, French members of the Sài Gòn Chamber of Commerce aimed to utilize the proposed tariff as an intervention in the existing Chinese dominance in Hong Kong

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<sup>66</sup> Chinese Merchants Petitioned to the Governor-General of Cochinchina Regarding the Decree of 27 January 1892, March 3, 1894, GOUCOCH L.0 N5522, TTLTQG-II, HCMC.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

where a growing industry of rice milling was concomitantly developed, a process inextricably linked to Hong Kong's escalating demand for Sài Gòn's rice and Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn Chinese' merchant networks.<sup>68</sup> The main justification for this tariff that gained traction in the chamber's discussion was that since Chinese merchants enjoyed all the local advantages regardless of labor or freight costs vis-à-vis French merchants, they had to comply with a comparable surtax so that competitions could be minimized.<sup>69</sup> On March 16, 1894, a representative from the French consulate in Hong Kong dispatched a message to Cochinchina. He informed the governor general of the commercial stagnation in Hong Kong where Hong-Kong based Chinese rice merchants now refused to carry any merchandises to Sài Gòn, citing fear of high duties. As one merchant frustratedly confessed, "we prefer to pay a little more for the freight of rice and to buy latter for ballast than to bow before the measure taken by the authorities of Indochina."<sup>70</sup>

Hong Kong's Chinese rice merchants' reactions to the news of French tariffs was nothing out of the ordinary; this British port city had consistently been the principal destination of rice export from Sài Gòn in the last few decades of the nineteenth century. In 1876, for example, a record high 3,577,500 piculs of rice were exported to Hong Kong, followed by 979,116 piculs to

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<sup>68</sup> Hong Kong's demand for Sài Gòn's rice increased exponentially since the mid-nineteenth century not only due to the forced opening of this port by British free trade imperialism in the aftermath of the Opium Wars, but also due to the frequency of rice shortages popular in Chinese port cities such as Hong Kong and Canton, which culminated in a series of food riots throughout their histories. As a cheaper alternative owing to the lack of grading and quality control, rice from Sài Gòn became an affordable solution to existing socioeconomic problems in China's port cities. For a more detailed treatment of this history, see Seung-Joon Lee, *Gourmets in the Land of Famine: The Culture and Politics of Rice in Modern Canton* (Stanford University Press, 2011); Elizabeth Sinn, *Between East and West: Aspects of Social and Political Development in Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Centre of Asian Studies University of Hong Kong, 1996).

<sup>69</sup> M. Holbe, Vice-Président de la Chambre de Commerce à Monsieur le Gouverneur de la Cochinchine, GOUCOCH L.13 N5554, TTLTQG-II, HCMC.

<sup>70</sup> Dispatché, Consulat de France à Hong Kong, March 16, 1894, GOUCOCH L.0 N5522, TTLTQG-II, HCMC. Li Tana also indicates that under the pressure of newly introduced French tariff, paddy export dropped from 165,000 tons in 1891 to 72,000 tons in 1896. See Li Tana, "Sài Gòn's Rice Export and Chinese Rice Merchants from Hong Kong, 1870s-1920s" in Thomas Engelbert, eds., *Vietnam's Ethnic and Religious Minorities: A Historical Perspective*, (Peter Lang: 2016), p. 39.

Surabaya, 444,730 piculs to Singapore, and 204,435 piculs to Batavia.<sup>71</sup> Additionally, Hong Kong held a prominent place in the Sài Gòn-Nanyang trade both for the French colonial government's strategic commercial expansion and the Chinese rice merchants.<sup>72</sup> On January 26, 1884, the French announced a subvention into a new telegraphic line construction project that would soon connect Sài Gòn to Tonkin and ultimately Hong Kong. "This new line of Sài Gòn-Tonquin-Hong Kong," a report emphasizes, "will operate independently of all control," which facilitated intensifying trading relations in these areas.<sup>73</sup> The Sài Gòn-Hong Kong rice trade generated an immense wealth that linked the waxes and wanes of many Chinese merchants' fortunes and privileged statuses in Hong Kong to their business operations in Sài Gòn. As a matter of fact, Chinese rice mills in Chợ Lớn often functioned as productive branches within a complicated web of Chinese commercial conglomerates based in Hong Kong and elsewhere. More importantly, they co-existed and came in direct competition with European trading houses, and shared a stake within the inter-port city, transnational rice trade. Tjia Mah Yeh (Tạ Mã Diên or 謝媽延), widely known as the founders of two Chợ Lớn's most prominent rice mills previously mentioned: Ban-Hong-Guan and Ban-Tek-Guan, took advantage of the Hong Kong connections to establish a steamship company in that port (The Hok Hai Steam Co 洪海), which then enabled him to engage in commercial activities across Hong Kong, Shanghai, Japan and further south in the Nanyang, including Singapore, Batavia, and the Philippines.<sup>74</sup> Yeh, utilizing his economic power and networks, also tapped into colonial politics. In addition to receiving the *Chevalier* honorary title from the French government, he was

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<sup>71</sup> Récapitulation du Riz par Pays [Summary of Rice Export by Countries], 1876, *Annuaire de la Cochinchine Française*, p. 221. BNF.

<sup>72</sup> Haydon Cherry, *Down and Out in Sài Gòn: Stories of the Poor in a Colonial City* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), pp. 27-28.

<sup>73</sup> "The Sài Gòn-Tonquin-Hong Kong Cable," *Straits Times Weekly Issues*, 26 January 1884. NewspaperSG, NLB.

<sup>74</sup> Li Tana, "Sài Gòn's Rice Export and Chinese Rice Merchants from Hong Kong, 1870s-1920s," pp. 33-52.

reported to have been involved in the creation of the *Société Indochinoise de Commerce* (Indochinese Society of Commerce), which operated on a capital of 100,000 piastres and pulled in donations from 21 members. He was listed as one of its main administrators until he died at the age of 79 in 1940.<sup>75</sup>

This intimate commercial connection with Hong Kong and the vast networks of capital and interpersonal relationships it required to operate rice mills as a risky business venture meant that French attempts to undermine Chinese commercial mobility would not receive favorable responses from the large merchant communities in Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn. In fact, the hype of Chinese protests was so intense and far-reaching that it bewildered the colonial administrators in Cochinchina. M. Aug Boudin, the General Procurer and the Chief of Judiciary Service of Indochina, exclaimed that “out of all the Asian traders in the colony, the Indian representatives had willingly complied to the decree without any difficulty; it is quite hard to understand how it is only in Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn that the resistance occurred with such ensemble and much energy.”<sup>76</sup>

Bouldin’s astonishment exposed the colonial ignorance of the nature of the Chinese trade and its business networks as well as a specific French ethno-political view of Chinese merchants in Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn. Charles Robequain’s explanations of French attitudes towards Chinese middlemen reveal dominant colonial fantasies about an obsequious, economically oriented, and persevering community with “a unique sense of the value of cooperation” whose talents distinguished themselves from the indolent Indochinese.<sup>77</sup> This stereotypical ethnographic view that arrived with the French colonial conquest constituted an essential myth that justified economic

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<sup>75</sup> “Notre Carnet Financier [Our Financial Book],” *L’Indochine : Revue économique d’Extrême-Orient*, 20 May, 1930, BNF, 160. News on his death could be found in *L’Écho Annamite: Organe de Défense des Intérêts Franco-Annamites* [Echoing the Voices of Annamites: In Defense of Franco-Vietnamese Interests], 08 August 1940.

<sup>76</sup> Rapport Au Gouverneur-General, GOUCOCH L.0 N5522, TTLTQG-II, HCMC.

<sup>77</sup> Charles Robequain, *The Economic Development of French Indochina*, Translation by Isabel A. Ward, (London, New York, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1944), pp. 36-37.

exploitation when a nascent colonial state faced an unfamiliar region long-defined by Chinese economic initiatives throughout its histories. As what historian Syed Alatas argues in the case of indigenous Malays, Filipinos, and Javanese, the “lazy native” as a colonial trope served to rationalize the commercial incapability and lack of self-innovation of the Vietnamese while rendering the cooptation of Chinese “middlemen” as not only inevitable but also critical in its self-proclaimed betterment of native livelihood and colonial prosperity.<sup>78</sup> Such “derogatory” view of the native and “positive” essentialization of Chinese merchants came to influence and define French colonial policies, exemplified by its unabashed reliance on Chinese-led monopolies. Unsurprisingly, French fulfillment of its civilizational claim rested upon a colonial graft configured by existing Chinese diasporic networks, which were crucial to the functioning of colonial capitalism on both an ideological and practical level. Chinese indignance in the event of French colonial impositions reflected the early implosion of such an internal conflict, but it also further reinforced the contingency of the Franco-Chinese political interactions. As much as French colonists tried to exert their assumed authorities on a mobile community, they could not avoid the reality of Chinese trade networks whose operations remained a cog in the colonial economic machine.

Consequently, when the French attempted to control this trade by continually readjusting tariffs on rice, their contradictory and inconsistent behaviors destabilized a crucial sector of their own colonial economy. On the one hand, colonial economic and political hegemony in Cochinchina, as the rice trade showed, required French participation in a comprador system with which Chinese intermediaries became a necessity in removing European cultural, linguistic, and

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<sup>78</sup> Syed Hussein Alatas, *The Myth of the Lazy Native: A Study of the Image of the Malays, Filipinos and Javanese from the 16th to the 20th Century and Its Function in the Ideology of Colonial Capitalism*. (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2012).

local barriers to market exploitations in Hong Kong and Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn.<sup>79</sup> On the other hand, as William Tai Yuen also demonstrates in the case of British Malaya, the comprador system serviced by Chinese merchants not only reduced unforeseen commercial risks in an unfamiliar terrain for Europeans but also “reduce transaction costs in connection with the search for information, enforcement of contracts, negotiation with the government, and access to the market.”<sup>80</sup> There existed a perennial, difficult-to-reconcile gap between colonial economic imperatives and Chinese domination of colonial capitalism. When the colonial regime sought to use custom tariffs, complete transparency based on European standards of accounting and rationality, and legal coercion to access the rice trade, they exceeded the threshold, the equilibrium that sustained a mutually enforced economic relationship and the *raison d’être* for the existence of such power relations. Soon later, the French proposed an article in the new commercial decree that forced Chinese trading houses to initiate a system of trade books quoted and certified by a delegated judge, but ended up angering Chinese merchants who refused to be subdued to such regime. This article, in the name of transparent registrations and quantitative accounting to control Chinese tax-payments, also imposed new legal responsibilities on now baffled congregation leaders who insisted on the unfairness of such system.<sup>81</sup>

In the late 1890s, rice crops in Cochinchina experienced a short-lived depression. Exacerbated by continual protests against the French tariff, rice businesses ceased almost together for the entirety of October in 1892. Chinese and, to a lesser extent, Indian merchants tirelessly

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<sup>79</sup> A similar pattern of European reliance on intermediary Chinese merchants is further explored in the case of the Cohong system in Canton and Hong Kong. See Paul A. Van Dyke, *Merchants of Canton and Macao: Politics and Strategies in Eighteenth-Century Chinese Trade* (Hong Kong : Kyoto: Hong Kong University Press ; Kyoto University Press, 2011); Paul A. Van Dyke, *Merchants of Canton and Macao: Success and Failure in Eighteenth-Century Chinese Trade* (Hong Kong: HKU Press, 2016).

<sup>80</sup> William Tai Yuen, *Chinese Capitalism in Colonial Malaya 1900-1941* (Bangi: Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 2013), pp. 380-381.

<sup>81</sup> Rapport Au Gouverneur-General, GOUCOCH L.0 N5522, TTLTQG-II, HCMC.

petitioned the chamber of commerce, arguing that it was not only the insurmountable burden of taxes that would be detrimental to their businesses but also the “inevitable fines” as a consequence of mindless formality violation.<sup>82</sup> Further facing unceasing waves of opposition from Chinese merchants in Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn and those abroad in the port of British Hong Kong, the French chamber of commerce shot down the implementation of the decree toward the end of 1899. Aug Boudin then averred that this decree and its multiple propositions had caused much too overwhelming indignation among the Chinese population in Chợ Lớn. With some degree of concession and ambiguity, he promised that “a new examination would be made then to propose to the chamber a new text, which while taking into the legitimate claims of the Chinese, would also safeguard the interests of Europeans.” Furthermore, he expanded on his position, concluding that “it seems to me that this solution would be a preferable one...In any case, until further notice, I order the prosecutions to suspend any proceedings.”<sup>83</sup>

The Chinese protest over French protective tariffs and other regulatory measures of the rice trade elucidates two important dimensions of colonial politics and early inter-ethnic interactions. First, Chinese rice monopoly, while providing a remarkable foundation for the colonial extraction of profits, had tremendous political impacts beyond its economic implications. They tested the limits of French economic policies that relied heavily on revenue generated from a Chinese-dominated trade and an ideological imperative to make Cochinchina a self-sufficient part independent of metropolitan budgets. French protectionism sought to intercept transnational Chinese rice networks and to bring them under a centralized colonial control. But, in obligating Chinese merchants to French “rational” formalities, modern standards of transparency, and

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<sup>82</sup> “The Trade of Sài Gòn,” *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 8 July, 1892. NewspaperSG, NLB.

<sup>83</sup> Suspension of Decree Due to Chinese Resistance, GOUCOCH L.0 N5522, TTLTQG-II, HCMC.

systematic registrations, it also forced them to be subordinated to extreme surveillance, or as one colonist puts it “lawful subject of the colonial state.”<sup>84</sup> And second, the French colonial state would soon have to confront their own ironies in their ambition to govern a massive colony and reinforce their contradictory roles as harbingers of modernization. The colonial encounters with Chinese merchants, a group often stereotyped as politically apathetic in dominant nationalist narratives,<sup>85</sup> in the customs battle to seize control of the rice trade laid the groundwork for what to come at the turn of the twentieth century: tariffs continued to be further manipulated while exports rose to exponential levels and agricultural industrialization continued to be ignored; intense urbanization and infrastructural modernization persisted to exploit the modality of an export-driven economy; and amidst deepening inequality enabled by the incoherence and fragility of the colonial economic structure, Chinese monopolies grew further in various economic sectors and were coopted by the French regime as the colonial “cash cows”.

Only this time, the wheel of history had turned. The consolidation of Chinese economic institutions in Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn and their embroilment in a problematic colonial political economy only reinforced the perverse nature of earlier colonial economic patterns. Without much of a resolution, toward the end of the First World War, shifting French colonization approaches to reorient their policies to a self-proclaimed liberal and moderate republicanism of Franco-Vietnamese collaboration, generated new platforms of political engagement and empowered a generation of colonized Vietnamese to confront the confusing reality of economic inequality and

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<sup>84</sup> Meeting of the Sài Gòn Chamber of Commerce, Session 321, December 29, 1893, GOUCOCH L.0 N5522, TTLTQG-II, HCMC.

<sup>85</sup> Wang Gungwu also addresses this analytical problem of Chinese politics, describing it as endemic in the historical narratives of the Chinese communities in Southeast Asia. He urges scholars to be attuned to the transformative impacts of Chinese political involvements. See Wang Gungwu, “Political Chinese: Their Contribution to Modern Southeast Asia,” in *Southeast Asia and the Modern World*, ed. Bernard Grossman (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1972), pp. 115–28.



ethnic distinctions. Vietnamese intellectuals, urban nationalists, and budding capitalists emerged in this theater of colonial politics, beginning to mobilize nationalist sentiments by drawing attention to the Sino-French relationship. Questioning the legitimacy of French colonization and Chinese domination, they ushered in a brand-new moment of inter-ethnic and political animosity that illuminated the enduring consequences of colonial modernity and Chinese presence in colonial Vietnam.

### **Sino-Vietnamese Conflicts: the 1919 Anti-Chinese Boycott and the “Rice Trade” Origins of Vietnamese Nationalism**

#### ***Setting the Stage: The High Colonial Moment (1890s-1910s)***

At the turn of the twentieth century, the colonial rice trade continued to dominate the economic landscape of Indochina and operate on the continuum of an intensive export-driven economy. The French colonial state, heeding the importance of this sector, poured huge resources into the reconstruction and further improvements of Sài Gòn’s harbor. In 1900, a massive project to build a 3,385 feet-long quay on the right bank of the Sài Gòn river and parallel docks, a multi-branched railroad connecting the Sài Gòn-Mỹ Tho line and rice mills on both banks of the canal *Arroyo Chinois*, and an anchoring post and an extended system of bridges linking the wharves to land traffic, was ultimately approved by the Chamber of Commerce.<sup>86</sup> This improvement plan cost a total of 2,169,029 piastres, accounting for a projected 48% of the year’s budget.<sup>87</sup> International rice export rose consistently during the period and French persisted with its protectionist imposition on rice commerce, which undermined the activities of Hong-Kong and Singapore-based Chinese rice merchants. Due to the withdrawal of foreign Chinese rice merchants, Chợ Lớn

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<sup>86</sup> “Sài Gòn Harbour Improvements,” *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 27 September, 1912. NewspaperSG, NLB.

<sup>87</sup> « Récapitulation Générale des Dépenses [Summary of General Expenses], » *Budget Local : Exercice. Gouvernement General de l’Indochine, Cochinchine*, 1900, p. 92. BNF.

rice factories took the lead. As Li Tana reveals, this period represented the peak of Sài Gòn's efflorescent rice commerce in Southern Vietnam marked by the domination of trans-regional merchants with homes in Chợ Lớn. At the core of it, the trade therefore still maintained a pattern of reliance on the *négociants*, intermediaries, and foreign creditors while French colonial policies continued to embolden existing wealth gaps between the lack of Vietnamese-led industrialization and Chinese economic autonomy.<sup>88</sup>

Inherently deep contradictions in French political economy and their policies exacerbated existing production relations and generated new sets of political and ethnic tension in Cochinchina. This stemmed from a few interrelated issues. First, the exorbitant costs of French long wars of pacification and the difficulties in their managing to receive subsidies from the metropolitan government for the colonial project had left Indochina sunken in catastrophic deficit. During a five-year period (1887-1891), this was estimated to be approximately 20 million francs. Combined with the costs of colonial annexations, including early public work projects and military operations, the French colonial government incurred an additional 80 million francs in Cochinchina and half a billion gold francs for the conquest of Tonkin. Confronting financial instability and crippling debts, the colonial regime had to resort to indirect taxations and concessions to monopolies to finance its ambitious economic modernization schemes.<sup>89</sup> In the specific case of the rice trade, this embroiled them in two parallel challenges: dependency on Chinese monopoly and the overreliance on the extension of the custom tariff system starting in 1887. Second, the rise of Chinese rice monopolists and rural creditors, while an existing feature that had a long history in the Nanyang

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<sup>88</sup> Li Tana, "Xunzhao Fa Zhu Yuenan Nanfang de Huaren Mi Shang 尋找法屬越南南方的華人米商 [In Search of the Chinese Rice Merchants in Cochinchina]," *Nanfang Huayi Yanjiu Za Zhi Di Si Juan* 南方華裔研究雜誌 第四卷, Volume 4, 2010, Australian National University.

<sup>89</sup> Pierre Brocheux et al., *Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization: 1858 - 1954*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), pp. 79-80.

networks and the integral Mekong Delta riverine junk trade since the seventeenth century, was a systematic by-product of colonial economic policies and symptomatic of the weaknesses in French structure of capitalistic domination. French inability to prevent land uses from being concentrated in the hands of wealthy landlords and failure to secure metropolitan interests in full-scale industrialization in Indochina aggravated Vietnamese peasants' livelihood, often resulting in their growing reliance on informal "black market" credits to manage land taxes and finance harvest.<sup>90</sup>

Despite some positive shifts in infrastructural expansion and increased production efficiency in the rice trade, during the first ten years of the twentieth century, the social and economic landscape of French Cochinchina could be best described as a combination of unpredictable flux and flow and intermittent periods of utmost instability. As historian Haydon Cherry elaborates in a recent social history of urban Sài Gòn, a typhoon hit Cochinchina in early May 1904, resulting in the mass-destruction of rice fields in the Mekong Delta and disrupted harvests in multiple provinces. The commercial rice economy faced a temporary stasis as export plummeted and migrant labor—both Chinese and Vietnamese—left the colony in search of opportunities elsewhere.<sup>91</sup> As a result, starting in 1905, French economic reports indicated rampant bankruptcies in Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn wherein not only French firms suffered but the effects also began to trickle down to an increasing number of Chinese-owned trading houses. Meanwhile, the French regime struggled to enforce legal measures to seize on Chinese assets as they liquidated and to demand their financial liabilities. The colonial secretary of the chamber of commerce frustratedly bemoaned that "some Chinese traders flee the scene as soon as they were aware of the bad

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<sup>90</sup> Christopher E Goscha, *Vietnam: A New History* (New York: Basic Books, 2016), p. 156.

<sup>91</sup> Haydon Cherry, *Down and Out in Sài Gòn*, pp. 10-11.

economic conditions while leaving behind no trace of their balance sheets to avoid responsibilities.”<sup>92</sup>

Worse, French moves to increase head taxes and custom tariffs led to a proliferation of rice smuggling most regularly in the junk-dominated lower Mekong region of Rạch Giá. In October 1903, the captain of one prominent shipping line operated by the *Messageries Fluviales de Cochinchine* requested additional interventions from the colonial state to put an end to “illegal smuggling of rice and acts of piracy” along the Cochinchinese-Cambodian water frontier by implementing a system of active and continuous surveillance.<sup>93</sup>

In 1907, rice crops in Cochinchina picked up so suddenly after a lackluster year that a sense of optimism prevailed. Excited colonial experts began to speculate that Cochinchina might overtake Burma in the rice trade since “the custom-house returns show that the rice export at Sài Gòn from January 1 to September 30, exceeded one million tons (French), about half a million of tons over the figures for the corresponding period of 1906.”<sup>94</sup> This favorable situation, however, did not last long. Only within three years beginning in 1910, the rice market in southern Vietnam again became sluggish. The French tried to remedy the issue by implementing a series of local agricultural campaigns in various Mekong Delta regions, aiming to stimulate the rice-growing processes in Chợ Lớn, Gia Định, Vĩnh Long, Trà Vinh, and Long Xuyên. However, provincial-level economic reports shared common denominators: southern Vietnam had suffered from a

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<sup>92</sup> Le Secrétaire Archiviste de la Chambre de Commerce à Monsieur le Président de la Chambre de Sài Gòn, « Faillite Endémique à Sài Gòn, » November 4, 1905, GOUCOCH L.13 N5554, TTLTQG-II, HCMC. While the French attempted to enforce new bankruptcy laws during this time, aiming to protect creditors from abrupt financial dissolutions and to enable them to formally collect 60% of declared asset, these processes had proven to be quite challenging when French officials dealt with Chinese rice businesses. A major reason for this administrative challenge, as Li Tana discusses elsewhere, was the fact that Chinese rice mills in Cochinchina were largely founded with capital channeled from overseas, which meant that most business deeds were not drawn up in Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn, but rather in Hong Kong and Canton.

<sup>93</sup> Correspondance, October 1903. GOUCOCH L.13 N5559, TTLTQG-II, HCMC. For a more detailed discussion of smuggling and piracy in Cochinchina, see Chapter 2 of this dissertation.

<sup>94</sup> “Untitled,” *The Straits Times*, 12 February 1908. NewspaperSG, NLB.

record low level of precipitation from 1912 to 1913, resulting in delayed rains and droughts that harmed harvests; paddy sale prices remained low, which disincentivized businesses; and industries, as one local village notable described, “were primitive, stagnant, and mediocre.”<sup>95</sup>

Unstable economic situations and French incapability to address grievances led to a gradual erosion of colonial legitimacy and an escalation of inter-ethnic antagonism. Open confrontation to challenge colonial policies or Chinese monopoly began to crop up during this period. Nationalist narratives, be it official histories published in Vietnam or Euro-American scholarship, that address this moment of socioeconomic instability emphasize the rise of a nascent Vietnamese nationalism centered on peasant revolts and French brutal crackdowns of political mass movements. As the first decade of the twentieth century saw the growing momentum of anti-colonial activities from a rising generation of Vietnamese nationalist luminaries, peasants’ discontent simultaneously broke out in reaction to the structural inequality of colonial capitalism.<sup>96</sup> What remains little discussed was, however, ethnic dimensions—specifically anti-Chinese sentiments—manifested or lurking in these anti-colonial uprisings. On April 13, 1909, the *Straits Times* reported on an occurring crisis in the Sài Gòn milling industry. Rice cultivators, predominantly Vietnamese rice growers, in the Western Mekong Delta collectively initiated a series of boycotts by withdrawing rice stocks from all principal markets “in the hope of realizing higher prices from the millers, who are mostly Chinese.” This was in a large part a reaction to a long-recurring practice of Chinese rice millers who, through the various means of concealing market prices and market information, forced the cultivators to part with their grains early at extremely low prices. Discovering these capitalist practices, Vietnamese rice cultivators refused *en masse* to sell their grains to Chinese intermediary

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<sup>95</sup> Rapports Economique du 2e Trimestre, *Bulletin de la Chambre de Commerce 1912-1913*, GOUCOCH L.13 N1134. TTLTQG-II, HCMC.

<sup>96</sup> See William J. Duiker, *The Rise of Nationalism in Vietnam: 1900-1941*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1976); David G. Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism, 1885-1925* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971).

agents, culminating in a large-scale stoppage that threw rice factories in Chợ Lớn into disarray. *Công Luận Báo* [*L'Opinion*], following the unfolding events closely, indicated that each of these mills was losing about five thousand dollars a day. Chinese speculators, who benefitted from “cultivators’ ignorance and lack of business knowledge,” also took the strongest blow as rice millers continued to lose enormous profits in this struggle. Consequently, Chinese millers and exporting firms resorted to petitioning to the French government to “bring pressure to bear on these delinquent cultivators,” forcing them to sell their paddies at appropriate rates to suit the millers.<sup>97</sup> The French then responded by advising Chinese mill owners to be vigilant of direct Sino-Vietnamese confrontations and to take on careful negotiations to avoid further disruption of the prosperous trade.

French refusals to take seriously Vietnamese concerns in the presence of what locals viewed as “Chinese economic malpractices” and inclinations to cast aside Chinese demands in the name of peaceful concessions in their attempt to appear as neutral, distant, and unbiased mediators who governed an ethnically plural space, only made matters worse. As early as 1907, local Vietnamese officials had begun to express their dissatisfactions regarding Chinese involvement in the rice trade and native displacement from this industry. In one such vocal letter that appeared in the colonial record written in Romanized Vietnamese and transcribed in French, an unnamed official desperately called for the approval of a daily bulletin to be published and circulated in Sài Gòn newspapers with detailed and transparent breakdowns of rice prices. This official insisted, “if the colonial government believed in the protection of native interests, you would make this information readily available to Annamese farmers, hence defending us against Chinese

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<sup>97</sup> “The Rice Industry. An Objection to Chinese Monopolists. Crisis in Sài Gòn Milling Industry,” *The Straits Times*, 13 April, 1909. NewspaperSG, NLB.

deceptions in Chợ Lớn and allowing us to sell our produces at fair prices.”<sup>98</sup> In the name of impracticality and falsification of information, French colonists often had no issue sweeping such requests under the rug. As a matter of fact, E. Schneegans, then president of the Chamber of Commerce, denied the legitimacy of Vietnamese concerns, opining that “the native are often mistaken if they thought the Chinese merchants are exploiting them with our protection...and that prices, though often well-regulated by the government [referring to the colonial state], are in constant fluxes...How is it possible for us to accurately report rice prices on a daily basis?”<sup>99</sup>

Beyond the radius of Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn and Cochinchina, racially charged Sino-Vietnamese altercations began to appear on a national scale and attract international attention. In May 1913, the Shanghai newspapers *Shenbao* (申報) reported on a mysterious incident in Hà Nội where a bomb was discovered in the inner city. While the exact reason for what seemed to be among the first publicly reported violent Sino-Vietnamese encounters remained elusive, the newspapers captured an intense chase between the colonial police force and Chinese suspects later revealed to be members of a merchant syndicate in north Vietnam. Ten Chinese in Hà Nội and four in Hải Phòng were arrested for implanting the bomb; one accomplice escaped by way of Longzhou county, a typically porous borderland delineated by Cao Bằng province in Vietnam and Guangxi in China. Further news coverage reported that trials of these Chinese merchants were held behind close door with no permissible judicial assistance from lawyers. Some sources speculated that this group of Chinese merchants were scapegoated by the French to pacify angry Vietnamese who planted the bomb to provoke conflicts.<sup>100</sup> These Chinese reports, shrouded in rumors and

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<sup>98</sup> Unnamed Petitioner, “Letter to Mr. E. Schneegans, President of the Sài Gòn Chamber of Commerce,” 7 August 1907, GOUCOCH L.13 N5559, TTLTQG-II, HCMC.

<sup>99</sup> “Monsieur E. Schne’egans, Président de la Chambre de Commerce à Monsieur Le Lieutenant-Gouverneur de la Cochinchine, Cabinet,” 17 August, 1907, GOUCOCH L.13 N5559, TTLTQG-II, HCMC.

<sup>100</sup> “Yue Sheng Jin Shi Jiyao 粵省近事紀要 [Recent Events in Canton],” *Shenbao* 申報 [Shanghai Daily News], Issue 6, No. 14468, 19 May, 1913.

unsubstantiated claims, by calling attention to the “blood and tear of overseas Chinese in Indochina,”<sup>101</sup> did exactly one thing: to exacerbate an atmosphere of growing inter-ethnic animosity and mutual distrust then widespread in colonial Vietnam. The ups and downs of the rice trade and their impacts on the political economy of Cochinchina with racial antagonism that simmered in the background were all but a build-up toward a decisive outburst of ethnic confrontations in early 1919. Cochinchina sank deeply into a commercial crisis: an endemic rice export deficit brought inter-regional rice commerce on a chokehold. Amidst this moment, Chinese communities emerged in a broad stroke as “evil capitalists” and the root of indigenous downfall. They were to be embroiled in new waves of political contestations from colonized Vietnamese and confronted once again the ambiguity of French civilizing mission.

***1919: The Southeast Asian Rice Crisis, Anti-Chinese Nationalism, and Inter-Asian Relations in French Colonial Vietnam***

In August 1919, a Chinese-owned coffee shop on Đỗ Hữu Vị street in Sài Gòn raised the price of its coffee cups from two to three cents. Almost immediately after, *Lục Tỉnh Tân Văn*, the official gazetteer of the six southern provinces, reported on the price surge, accompanying this op-ed with accusations of the Chinese shopkeepers’ harassment and discriminations against its Vietnamese customers.<sup>102</sup> This simple incident soon spiraled into the most scandalous occurrence of the year: major southern Quốc Ngữ newspapers covered it with scorns and xenophobic undertones; other Chinese coffeeshops followed suit to protest Vietnamese allegations. During a

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<sup>101</sup> “Yuenan Huaqiao Zhi Xue Leihen 越南華僑之血淚痕 [The Blood and Tear of Overseas Chinese in Vietnam], “*Shenbao* 申報 [Shanghai Daily News], Issue 6, No. 14499, 19 June, 1913.

<sup>102</sup> *Lục Tỉnh Tân Văn* [The Six Southern Province Gazetteer] (Henceforth *LTTV*) 660, 18 August 1919. “Khách Trú Thị Nhục Ta. Đồng Bang Mau Thức Dậy” [The Chinese Are Humiliating Us. We, Vietnamese, Must Wake Up!]. I later locate this coffee shop from a local commercial report published in 1923 that recalled the incident. See *Công Luận Báo* [The Opinion] (Henceforth *CLB*) 619, 14 September 1923. “Tình Hình Thương Mại Cần Thơ” [Report on Commerce in Cần Thơ]. TVQGVN Newspapers Collection.



four-year period (1919-1923), a subsequent nationwide boycott of Chinese businesses exploded in Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn and spread quickly to other urban centers while anti-Chinese sentiments engulfed the colonial public sphere.

1919 was a crucial year in the history of modern Vietnam, but its legacies are fraught with ambiguity and oblivion. The scant writings on this period have been dominated by either a Marxian teleological perspective of Vietnamese political and economic nationalism or the privileging of its periodical significance as the height of Albert Sarraut's Franco-Vietnamese collaboration, then defined by a self-proclaimed liberal republicanism and "humanist approach to colonization." Vietnam-based historians, writing about the topic, tend to ascribe the primacy of anti-Chinese outbreak to an *a priori* Vietnamese nationalism and calls it patriotism with capitalistic orientation (*Phong Trào Yêu Nước Xu Hướng Tư Sản*).<sup>103</sup> This process of historical reframing, what George Dutton theorizes as "cooptation" that subsumed ill-fitting collective social actions under incontestable narratives pointed toward the success of a communist-led revolution, marginalizes ethnic dimensions and the issues of colonial multi-ethnic governance and interactions that characterized this period of emergent conflicts.<sup>104</sup> Simultaneously, recent works produced by historians of colonial Vietnam, while rightly hinting at the deeper root of colonial economic inequalities and casting the boycott as a structural responses to the consequences of colonial modernity, tends to treat anti-Chinese antagonism as merely a product of Francophile urban

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<sup>103</sup> See for example, Đặng Thị Vân Chi, "Phong Trào Tẩy Chay Hoa Kiều ở Việt Nam Năm 1919 (Qua Nguồn Tư Liệu Báo Chí Đầu Thế Kỷ XX) [The 1919 Anti-Chinese Boycott Movements in Vietnam through Newspapers Materials]," Hà Nội, Việt Nam: Kỷ Yếu Hội Thảo Quốc Tế Việt Nam Học lần Thứ Tư, 1103-1115. Đinh Xuân Lâm, Phạm Xanh, and Trần Viết Nghĩa characterize the anti-Chinese boycott as the evidence of Vietnamese revolutionary spirits (*Tinh Thần Cách Mạng*). See Đinh Xuân Lâm, Phạm Xanh, and Trần Viết Nghĩa, "Phong Trào Tẩy Chay Khách Trú (1919)" in *Hà Nội Trong Cuộc Vận Động Giải Phóng Dân Tộc*, (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Hà Nội, 2010), pp. 146-149.

<sup>104</sup> George Dutton, "Threatening Histories: Rethinking the Historiography of Colonial Vietnam," *Critical Asian Studies* 45, no. 3 (September 1, 2013): 365-92.

nationalists' political propaganda often representing the political reform initiatives by the Constitutionalist Party of Indochina.<sup>105</sup>

What remains occluded in these accounts of early Sino-Vietnamese encounters, beyond the frameworks of patriotism and elite-based constitutional politics, was the indisputably critical roles of the rice trade—more specifically the politics of rice and its cultural ramifications—in shaping inter-ethnic, or to borrow Christopher Goscha's concept, inter-Asian relations in French Indochina. Central to the formation of racially charged and practical economic debates that inundated contemporaneous political discourses in Cochinchina were the question of Chinese rice monopoly and the nature of Chinese settlement and their relationship to the colonial state. Vietnamese mobilizational effort to wrestle with these political and economic questions and oft-forgotten Chinese responses, this chapter argues, contributed to the formation of Vietnamese nationalism long accepted as a direct consequence of anticolonial mobilization or resistance to foreign intervention. The making of such national identities rooted in anti-Chinese discourses brought ethnic antagonism to the forefront of public debates and spotlighted the colonial questions of governance, subjecthood, and progress.

Consequently, this final section, drawing on economic and political debates in French and Vietnamese-language newspapers, places the 1919 anti-Chinese boycott in the intertwined contexts of complex Chinese presence in colonial Vietnam grounded in their economic practices and the long-standing structural inequality resulted from French colonial economic policies at the turn of the twentieth century, and the global consequences of the rice trade where Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn, as a crucial node of colonial commerce, suffered drastically from a regional rice crisis hitting

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<sup>105</sup> On the Constitutionalist Party of Indochina, see R. B. Smith, "Bùi Quang Chiêu and the Constitutionalist Party in French Cochinchina, 1917-30," *Modern Asian Studies* 3, no. 2 (1969): 131–50; Hue-Tam Ho Tai, "The Politics of Compromise: The Constitutionalist Party and the Electoral Reforms of 1922 in French Cochinchina," *Modern Asian Studies* 18, no. 3 (1984): 371–91.

Southeast Asia in 1919. The rice trade and its Chinese participants, while remaining outliers to narratives of Vietnamese nationalism, transformed not only economic but also sociopolitical relations within Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn as a global city. Discourses centered on rice, as a national product, an etiology of Vietnamese commercial failure and Chinese predominance, and a key tenet of the French civilizing mission propelled momentous shifts in both Chinese and Vietnamese consciousness regarding their “rightful places” in colonial society. Such debates, ironically giving rise to what Phillippe Peycam defines as “a public culture of political contestation,” caught Chinese merchants, Vietnamese intellectuals, and French colonists in a revelatory and messy political feud that gripped the ambiguous reality of French rule and the state of interethnic relations in the colony.

In mid-January 1919, it was rumored that the governor-general of Cochinchina was about to mandate an official ban on rice exports. The news spread quickly and evoked a salient atmosphere of insecurity and apprehension among circles of small business-owners, retailers, and predominantly farmers. In the midst of overwhelming anxiety, the newspapers *Lục Tỉnh Tân Văn*, published a column, titled “méfiez-vous du faux bruit,” to diffuse tension and asserted that this was a Chinese’s ploy to play on naïve farmers’ fear of inability to sell off their grains in the future and to induce them to do so now at unprecedentedly low prices. The article came with a strong caution: there was neither confirmation nor initiative from the French chamber of commerce and the colonial government. The entire thing was a Chinese-concocted hoax.<sup>106</sup>

Little did they know that not only was the rice-export prohibition underway, but Cochinchina was about to face the one of the first protracted rice crises from 1919 to 1921. This tumultuous moment began in February 1919—precisely a month after the rumor spread—and posed a

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<sup>106</sup> *LTTV* 590 12 January 1919. “Đừng Tin Tiếng Đồn Huyền (Méfiez-vous du Faux Bruit)” [Do Not Trust Rumors]. TVQGVN Newspapers Collection.

challenge of governance to the colonial government.<sup>107</sup> According to a report submitted by the ministry of rice and agriculture (*Sở Mễ Cốc*), at the end of 1918 and early 1919, there were widespread crop failures throughout the Mekong Delta. With much lower production output from bad harvests, the French government had to readjust its monthly export proportions (originally 60,000 tons for domestic uses and French export and the remaining was for other markets).<sup>108</sup> This number was significantly reduced to 20,000 tons after a meeting on the morning of February 7 when the French governor of Cochinchina, M. Maspéro, in the agreements of several officials from important Indochinese companies and Vietnamese as well as Chinese representatives, reached a deal in which two-third of the quota would be French export and one-third for Chinese uses.<sup>109</sup> This export cutback decision was announced in the context of rice shortage that was at the threshold of threatening a starving population and the French's failure to sustain the check-and-balance of domestic and export quantities. Even in such situation, well-known Chinese firms owned by Quách Đàm, Tạ Mã Điền, and the Hokkien Tan Ho Seng, continued to dominate the volume of rice export commission within the approved quota.<sup>110</sup>

Nevertheless, the economic situation saw no signs of improvement and was exacerbated in the month of July 1919. The rice shortage caused famines that ravaged the countryside. Rice export

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<sup>107</sup> The rice trade crisis in French Cochinchina in 1919 was an empire-wide moment characterized by unprecedentedly low rice production and export wherein colonies with trade relations suffered from the repercussions. This occurred due to a combination of poor harvest and speculative pricing. For detailed accounts of the crisis in other Southeast Asian colonies, see Paul H. Kratoska, "The British Empire and the Southeast Asian Rice Crisis of 1919-1921," *Modern Asian Studies* 24, no. 1 (1990): 115-46. Yoshihiro Chiba, "The 1919 and 1935 Rice Crises in the Philippines The Rice Market and Starvation in American Colonial Times," *Philippine Studies* 58, no. 4 (2010): 523-56. For a comprehensive history of the Southeast Asian rice frontier, see Michael Adas, *The Burma Delta: Economic Development and Social Change on an Asian Rice Frontier, 1852-1941*, New Perspectives in Southeast Asian Studies (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011).

<sup>108</sup> Nguyễn Phan Quang, *Góp thêm tư liệu Sài Gòn - Gia Định, 1859-1945* [Further Contribution to Sài Gòn-Gia Định Documentation, 1859-1945] (TP. Hồ Chí Minh : Nhà Xuất Bản Trẻ, 1998), p. 113.

<sup>109</sup> *LTTV* 598 13 February 1919. "Le Commerce du Riz." [Rice Commerce].

<sup>110</sup> Chambre de Commerce Chinoise de Chợ Lớn, « Répartition du Contingent Chinois pour exportation en Juin, » May 31, 1919, STCNK 685, TTLTQG-II HCMC.

quantity hit an all-time-low level and reached 753,804 tons in 1919, which paled significantly in comparison with 1,288,895 tons in 1918 (a 42% reduction in export).<sup>111</sup> Meanwhile, as a few journalistic reports claimed, the Chinese, in addition to receiving the privilege of one-third of export quota, also took advantage of the shortage to stock up massive grain loads and, under high market demand, sold rice at obscenely high prices. At the same time, Chinese merchants were reported to have stopped selling rice to the domestic market, which worsened the famine, and instead profiteered from trade deals with other international markets.<sup>112</sup> As a resolution to the crisis, the French announced an official ban on rice export on September 1, 1919, mainly to preserve grain flows within Cochinchina and stabilize domestic situation before the principal market, as the French authority hoped, equilibrated. This prohibitive phase lasted for three and a half months until the end of December of that same year. Even so, the stagnation of rice export continued to exert negative impacts on Indochina up until 1920 when rice crop “was again below normal and very little grain was released for export.”<sup>113</sup>

It was no surprise that the disruption in trade activities in Indochina caused by the international rice crisis and French export ban coincided with the coffee-cup scandal that conveniently served as a pretext for escalating anti-Chinese sentiment. Following this incident, a massive anti-Chinese boycott movement, known as *Phong Trào Vận Động tẩy chay Khách Trú*, broke out first in Cochinchina and then spread to northern areas such as Hà Nội, Hải Phòng, and

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<sup>111</sup> Reproduced from year-end aggregate rice export statistics as recorded in the periodical *Bulletin de la Chambre de Commerce de Saïgon* from the National Library of France in the following issues: November 12, 1918; December 23, 1919; December 21, 1920; December 20, 1921; December 19 1922, and December 19 1923. Total exportation tonnage was calculated based on a categorical breakdown of 5 types of rice (white, broken, cargo, paddy, and wheat) and exporting areas including France, Europe, Africa, America, the Netherland Indies, Singapore, Hong Kong, India, and Japan.

<sup>112</sup> *LTTV* 591 16 January. “Lúa Rẻ Gạo Mất (La Baisse du Paddy et la Hausse du Riz)” [Cheap Grain, Expensive Rice]. TVQGVN Newspapers Collection.

<sup>113</sup> Paul H. Kratoska, “The British Empire and the Southeast Asian Rice Crisis of 1919-1921,” *Modern Asian Studies* 24, 1 (1990), p. 129.

Nam Định—cities with large Chinese populations.<sup>114</sup> In southern Vietnam, while Bùi Quang Chiêu and Nguyễn Phan Long employed an anti-Chinese political platform to galvanize popular support for their seats in the colonial bureaucracy, wealthy Vietnamese landowners like Nguyễn Chánh Sắt and Nguyễn Phú Khai, also emboldened by nativist rhetoric, established a new economic organization, the *Société Commerciale Annamite (Annam Thương Hiệp Hội)*, to cater to Vietnamese economic interests.<sup>115</sup> Northern Vietnamese capitalists also took advantage of the political momentum to attack Chinese predominance. Among the most vocal figures at the helm of the movement was the much-venerated Bạch Thái Bưởi who pioneered earliest Vietnamese effort to directly compete with Chinese capitalists in the fluvial transportation industry and ultimately succeeded in Tonkin. Valorized as an embodiment of native prosperity against Chinese prowess, Bạch Thái Bưởi, having owned an established ship repair factory and about 25 boats of diverse capacities that operated throughout north Vietnam and internationally by 1917, effectively propagated anti-Chinese sentiments to attract Annamese customers and encourage them to steer clear of any Chinese services.<sup>116</sup>

In the early 1920s, this nationwide boycott movement descended into such chaos and violence that General Cen Chunxuan, Viceroy of Guangdong and Guangxi, sent a telegram to Beijing, urging the Republican Chinese government to appeal to the French legation for “stopping the lawless actions of the natives there [Annam].” A report from the *Peking Daily* excoriated, perhaps not without exaggeration, that many Chinese shops were set on fire and the Chinese

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<sup>114</sup> Dương Trung Quốc, *Việt Nam: Những Sự Kiện Lịch Sử, 1919-1945* [Vietnam: A Historical Chronology, 1919-1945] (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Giáo Dục, 2000), pp. 15-16.

<sup>115</sup> Christopher E. Goscha, “Widening the Colonial Encounter: Asian Connections Inside French Indochina During the Interwar Period,” *Modern Asian Studies* 43, no. 5 (September 2009): 1189–1228, p. 1206.

<sup>116</sup> *Nam Phong* [Southern Wind], “Chấn Chính Thương Trường, Một Cái Gương Cho Thương Giới Nước Ta: Ông Bạch Thái Bưởi [Improving the Field of Commerce, An Exemplary Case of Our Country’s Commercial Profession: Sir. Bạch Thái Bưởi],” No. 29, November 29, 1919.

residents of Chợ Lớn “murdered without the slightest provocation.”<sup>117</sup> Chinese factory owners in Chợ Lớn, resenting Vietnamese boycotts, reportedly fired Vietnamese workers and replaced them with newly recruited Chinese labor. This led some Vietnamese pundits to call on the colonial government to implement a harsher poll tax on Chinese businesses as a punitive measure.<sup>118</sup>

The initial rhetoric of this boycott was centered on immediate issues surrounding the deceptive characters of the Chinese as both a racial and legal category and their domination of the rice trade in the colonial economy. As reporters and journalists habitually invoked demeaning terms such as “Chú Khách” (visitors), “Khách Trú” (guest people), “Ngoại Kiều” (foreign aliens), and “Chệt”<sup>119</sup> to address and identify Chinese merchants in a racialized manner, such languages, enmeshed in economic discourses, became common tools to construct negative stereotypes of Chinese as frauds and exploitators. Given the long history of Chinese involvement in the rice trade and the triggering effects of the interregional rice crisis, rice businesses undoubtedly emerged at the center of public critique. Vietnamese pundits, seizing on the favorable opportunity of a pervasive anti-Chinese atmosphere, explained the rise of rice monopoly through the lens of unregulated Chinese malpractices.

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<sup>117</sup> *Malaya Tribune*, “China and Annam: Agitation in French Indochina,” February 6, 1920. NewspaperSG, NLB.

<sup>118</sup> *LTTV*, 664 27 August 1919. “Khách Trú Tẩy Chay An Nam” [The Chinese boycott Annamese]. TVQGVN Newspapers Collection.

<sup>119</sup> While the word “Chệt” was often used in a derisive manner to refer to the Chinese in Vietnam, its etymology, journalist Phan Khôi suggests, remains uncertain. A few speculations exist to explain its terminological roots. One explanation rests on the French use of the word “*serge*” to refer to the Chinese silk trade with Europe and then collectively to people from “China.” In the advent of French colonization, the term was pronounced as “Xệt” in Vietnamese transliteration, which resembled “Chệt” and was also employed by native to broadly address Chinese migrants. Others have suggested that “Chệt” is phonetically rendered after the Teochew word that meant “little brother”, implying a lower social hierarchy. Lastly, historian Christopher Goscha indicated the possible linkage between the English usage of the word “chinks” and “Chệt” as its Vietnamese transliteration. See Phan Khôi, “Từ Đâu Người Minh Kêu Người Tàu Bằng Chệt [Why did we call Chinese migrants “Chệt”?], *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* [The Women Daily], No. 182, December 12, 1932. TVQGVN Newspapers Collection; Christopher E. Goscha, “Widening the Colonial Encounter,” p. 1203.



**Figure 7: “Khách Trú Thị Nhục Ta. Đồng Bang Mau Thức Dậy.” (The Chinese are humiliating us. We Vietnamese must WAKE UP!)**

*Source: Lục Tỉnh Tân Văn, 660, 18 August 1919*

*Courtesy of the National Library of Vietnam*



**Figure 8: A Tailoring Business Encourages Vietnamese Customers to Visit Vietnamese Stores in the Event of Anti-Chinese Movements**

*Source : La Jeune Asie. Économique, Politique et Sociale. Au Service de l'œuvre Française en Indochine, December 18, 1919.*

*Courtesy of Gallica, National Library of France*



“Why does Cochinchinese and Sài Gòn rice have a reputation for being of low quality and consequently sell at such cheap prices in the global market?” A reporter posed the question. As a matter of fact, foreign importers tended to decry (*chê bai*) the grain qualities from Cochinchina, often as a rebuke for its uneven shapes and lack of refinement (mostly the low proportion of white rice to other multi-color grains). According to this journalist, they also ascribed such poor quality to Vietnamese peasants’ laziness, lack of technical expertise, and backward cultivating and harvesting methods. But this pundit pointed out the irony in such unfair assessment of native agricultural practices and foreigners’ lack of knowledge of Indochina’s rice industry: it was, after all, the Chinese who owned the means of production. Vietnamese farmers’ contentions stemmed from European investors’ arbitrary preferences for the different types of rice produced in the Mekong Delta. Traditionally, there were four main kinds of grains named after the provinces where they were cultivated: Vĩnh Long, Gò Công, Bãi Xàu, and Bạc Liêu. The most reputable one was the Vĩnh Long rice, but its grains were notorious for long shape and uneven sizes, consequently being the most fragile and undesirable for long-distance trade.

Europeans had a high demand for the Gò Công rice because of its tasteful and flawless appearance (round in shape with a refined white shade). Before being packaged in cargoes for export, rice was transported from Chinese middlemen to the mills for grinding and scrubbing to achieve maximal refinement. The enormity of grain tonnages and increasing demands for rice from Cochinchina, coupled with the limited daily capacity of Chinese rice mills despite their improved efficiency, rendered “purity” a virtually near-impossible task. As a result, once rice stocks arrived at factories, they were often, to some degree, mixed in with one another.<sup>120</sup> Vietnamese critics were highly critical of the foreigner’s unfounded criticisms (*chê đen, chê trắng*) because, as one view

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<sup>120</sup> Nguyễn Phan Quang, *Thị trường lúa gạo Nam Kỳ, 1860-1945* [*The Commercial Economy of Rice in Southern Vietnam, 1860-1945*] (TP. Hồ Chí Minh: Nhà Xuất Bản Tổng Hợp Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh, 2004). 23.

held, their complaints were misplaced. It was not the farmers who should take the blame for foreign companies' dissatisfaction with their purchases, but rather the middlemen—Chinese rice mills—who directly handled scrubbing procedures. The low quality of rice, according to this disparaging discourse, was an obvious feature of Chinese irresponsible and cunning commercial practices. As Chinese monopolies enabled merchants to seize a disproportionately large amount of grain at the time of harvest, it also let the Chinese roam freely with neglect in quality control and disregard for proper grain-processing because, as a writer insisted, the Chinese were “collectively blinded by profits”. One even went further and exasperatedly professed “before the contract (*giao kèo*), the grains were white and spotless (*trắng trong*). As soon as they were in the hands of the Chinese, they turned ugly. European complaints are, of course, unavoidable.”<sup>121</sup>

But critique of Chinese rice mills and business practices soon turned into a definitive parameter of defining Vietnamese identities against “evil Chinese capitalists” by ways of diagnosing prominent features of Chinese domination and grappling with various means to overcome the weaknesses of indigenous commercial capability. This process as it unfolded first through overtly racialized critiques and internal practical self-reflections, I argue, remains key to the formation of Vietnamese ethnic solidarity and the marginalization of Chinese positions in colonial Vietnam in the 1920s. Karl Gerth’s study of consumption and nationalism in early twentieth-century China is suggestive at this juncture. He argues that the nationalization of brands and politicized consumption through associative marginalized practices, such as the boycotts of Japanese goods in China on the eve of the Japanese invasion, enabled intellectuals and experts to carve out the meanings of national consumers, allowing them to experience Chinese nationalism.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> *LTTV* 549, 22 August 1918. “Người Ngoại Quốc Chê Gạo Nam Kỳ (Phần 1)” [Foreigners Decry Cochinese Rice (Part 1)]. TVQGVN Newspapers Collection.

<sup>122</sup> Karl Gerth, *China Made: Consumer Culture and the Creation of the Nation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center, 2004).

The anti-Chinese boycott in Indochina, through its rejection of Chinese influences, constituted one of a series of cultural transformations that advanced the idea of a Vietnamese national identity through political and economic discourses while reconfiguring inter-ethnic relations. One of the foremost contentions that arose out of the boycott was Vietnamese national characteristics vis-à-vis the Chinese. Essentialist in nature, these debates pursued a common goal, that was to search for and figure out core Vietnamese qualities that counterposed to Chinese “parasites” whom, these interlocutors insisted, sucked wealth and native benefits out of the colony. Earlier in 1918, *Lục Tỉnh Tân Văn* featured a column that dwelled on the utility of learning Chinese. As it turned out, the reporter narrated a story of an Englishman who traveled on a train from Hải Phòng and encountered a suspicious instance of human trafficking involving a group of Chinese men and a Vietnamese female hostage. Overhearing the men’s whispering in Chinese as they plotted a murder of the girl, the Englishman took out his gun and confronted the group of villains. When the train reached the station, he reported the case to custom polices, leading them to arrest a ring of traffickers. The moral of the story was not so subtle: had the heroic Englishman not spoken and comprehended the Chinese language, he would have been tricked and killed by murderous Chinamen (*Chinoa Sát Nhơn*).<sup>123</sup>

Popular culture writings also aided in the co-construction of predominant Chinese stereotypes not only as the causes of social vices, illegality, and lawlessness, but also as neo-colonizers of Vietnam. In the popular imagination, the Chinese were often described stereotypically as sexual predators who preyed on Vietnamese women and therefore threatened the Franco-Vietnamese and Indochinese “marriage” union.<sup>124</sup> In the business domain, Chinese

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<sup>123</sup> *LTTV* 530 22 March 1918. “Biết Tiếng Chinoa Có Ích Lắm” [How useful it is to learn Chinese!]. TVQGVN Newspapers Collection.

<sup>124</sup> Micheline Lessard, “‘Organisons-Nous!’ Racial Antagonism and Vietnamese Economic Nationalism in the Early Twentieth Century,” *French Colonial History* (2007): 171–201, pp. 183-185.

merchants were also frequently typecast as a deceptive and untrustworthy group of people to engage in commercial transactions. The newspapers were dotted with commonplace portrayals of the Chinese as *Gian Thương* (frauds or quacks). L.T.H Bình Lễ recalled in frustration Chinese shady business practices in selling alcohol and cigarettes. He lamented that not only did the Chinese routinely dilute wine with water to make profits, but they also ripped cigarettes off band-new packages and sold these at exorbitant prices.<sup>125</sup> Journalists also brought to the spotlight endless complaints about Chinese malpractices, including the allegations that the Chinese mixed fish-sauce with poisonous substances to reduce manufacturing costs and then sold these in bulk to Vietnamese customers. This same piece also mounted a diatribe against the Chinese by citing other newspapers to substantiate its claims, which encompassed *Impartial*'s criticism of the Chinese smuggling of low-quality goods into the market, the *Cochinchine libérale*'s accusation of Chinese's infusion of morphine into medicine, and *La Tribune Indigène*'s caution of Chinese's "colonization" of Chợ Lớn's land and phasing out the Vietnamese.<sup>126</sup>

The ubiquity of negative Chinese stereotypes from murderers to rapists, and business frauds existed in parallel with a nascent emergence of fear and anxiety over the Chinese's economic dominance in Cochinchina. In fact, these stories about the horror of the "Chinamen" shared a common trait. They all served as cautionary tales for a worrying population, warning the Vietnamese against doing businesses with the Chinese or purchasing any products from this community. This racialized construction of Chineseness as the embodiment of duplicitous behaviors and social immorality set the tone for the boycott movement and heralded an imminent

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<sup>125</sup> *LTTV* 549 22 August 1918, "Chêc Gian Trá, Thuốc Rút Bót Rượu Pha Thêm" [Deceitful Chinese Stealing Cigarettes and Diluting Wine]. TVQGVN Newspapers Collection.

<sup>126</sup> *LTTV* 553 05 September 1918, "Chêc Gian Trá." [Deceitful Chinese]. TVQGVN Newspapers Collection.

meditation on commercial self-betterment, particularly in the rice trade, wherein many of these racist attacks continued to operate as the foundation of critique.

But debates over essential national characters inevitably confronted their discursive limits and the Indochinese economic reality. On the one hand, as journalist Mộng Huê Lầu warned at the peak of anti-Chinese boycotts, the Vietnamese must refrain from a preoccupation with the rhetoric of the movement and begin to engage in practical self-reflections of their own problems. Casting the Chinese's increasing commercial prominence as a repercussion of Vietnamese own ignorance, this columnist highlighted Vietnamese unwillingness to inquire seriously into the *modus operandi* of commerce, their apathy to technological self-innovation (citing the Chinese' inventive proclivity), and, unlike the previous interlocutors, emphasized a deficit of solidarity in social and business conducts.<sup>127</sup> Most importantly, for this reason, besides criticizing the Chinese, he argued that the Vietnamese had much to learn from them.<sup>128</sup> Promoting this line of constructive debates rather than blind resistance to Chinese domination, Thượng Chi, writing for the newspapers *Nam Phong*, announced a call to action:

The Chinese position in our commercial economy is increasingly influential, especially that in Cochinchina. We have so far let the grain trade fall into the hands of Chinese capitalists. While the situation in Tonkin is not as dire in comparison, we need to learn the lesson and take critical actions to effectively compete with them.

We need to take a step back and reflect deeply on various business approaches the Chinese have been employing to outperform us, and decide on proper means to confront the challenge. In order to engage our enemies, we first and foremost need to study their strengths and weaknesses to have a clear-cut understandings of their commercial methods. Otherwise, overzealous and indiscriminate boycotts will be counter-productive; we will be eternally caught in their traps.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> *LTTV* 619 27 April 1919. “Nỗi Khổ Hậu Đến Trước Mắt.” [The Suffering is Before Our Eyes]. TVQGVN Newspapers Collection.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.* TVQGVN Newspapers Collection.

<sup>129</sup> *Nam Phong* [*Southern Wind*], “Chấn Chính Thương Trường [To Improve Our Commerce],” No 27, September 1919.

On the other hand, as Micheline Lessard and Philippe Peycam demonstrate, while racialized images of Chinese “others” and the venoms of anti-Chinese attacks had effectively reached a wider audience owing to the accelerated development of modern print media, they conveniently ignored centuries of Chinese commercial networks serving as a lynchpin that sustained the colonial economy and the rise of Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn as global cities.<sup>130</sup> Furthermore, they did not foresee Chinese responses to such racial attacks once the intensity of boycotts had gradually impacted their livelihood and relationship to colonized Vietnamese. In fact, on a local level, one can observe the tension generated from the disparity of nationalist discourses that used anti-Chinese languages to marginalize a business community and people’s day-to-day consumption practices. Newspapers reported, with apparent frustration and contempt, on Vietnamese still-consistent presence at Chinese grocery and necessity stores as well as food stalls, criticizing such behaviors as “un-nationalistic” and showing a poor sense of collectivity (*thiếu tình đoàn thể*).<sup>131</sup> The press, in so doing, shaped a volatile and constrained environment in which anti-Chinese nationalism now defined both business and consumption patterns, necessitating what Sherman Cochran describes as a façade or appearance of nationalistic practices that disengaged real solutions from structural economic issues.<sup>132</sup>

In August 1919, a Vietnamese commentator made a bold suggestion to re-name all popular Cantonese appetizers (點心) to Vietnamese terms as they were now produced and sold by ethnic Vietnamese to distance Vietnamese stores from those owned by the Chinese. The rebranding of

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<sup>130</sup> Micheline Lessard, “‘Organisons-Nous!’ Racial Antagonism and Vietnamese Economic Nationalism in the Early Twentieth Century,” *French Colonial History* 8 (2007): 171–201; Philippe M. F. Peycam, *The Birth of Vietnamese Political Journalism: Sài Gòn, 1916-1930* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

<sup>131</sup> *LTTV* 674 19 September 1919. “Bán Nhỏ Lợi To. Một Vồn Hai Lờ Trước Mắt.” TVQGVN Newspapers Collection.

<sup>132</sup> Sherman Cochran, *Big Business in China: Sino-Foreign Rivalry in the Cigarette Industry, 1890-1930*, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1980).

these dishes employed ethnic descriptors to downplay their Chinese origins while promoting Vietnamese commercial autonomy: “Shumai 燒賣 could be called ‘affinity’; Har gow 蝦餃 could be called ‘collectivity’; Baozi 包子 could be called ‘civilization’; Almond cake 杏仁蛋糕 could be called “homogeneity’; and white spongy cake 白糖糕 could be called “loyalty.”<sup>133</sup> However, as Vietnamese shied away from interacting with Chinese businesses, Chinese traders and shop-owners creatively receded to the background and avoided any Sinitic appearance that ensured their survivals amidst intensifying Vietnamese nationalism. News of “fake Annamese stores” graced newspapers coverage, bringing forth waves of gendered attacks on Vietnamese women who, married to Chinese business owners, rose to occasion as storefront managers to “deceive Vietnamese customers.” Đoàn Vô Cặng, infuriated by the involvement of Annamese women, treated such business strategies as duplicitous and called these Vietnamese women contemptuous Chinese collaborators.<sup>134</sup>

In the face of racial antagonism, Chinese migrants in Cochinchina were by no means just silent observers. Rather, they participated in open press forums, engaged with political dialogues, and responded to anti-Chinese discourses. One remarkable debate occurred between a Chinese man who launched a vitriolic attack on the Vietnamese in response to their condemnation of the Chinese ways of life, and a Vietnamese man of letters named Nguyễn Công Luận. The Chinese pundit asserted that Vietnamese commercial failure was a result of their civilizational backwardness and status as a colonial subject. In so doing, this Chinese man was making a distinction between the Chinese, as helpful collaborators in the French’s quest to enlighten the confused Annamese race, and the Vietnamese as a subjugated, incompetent population. Without

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<sup>133</sup> *LTTV* 664 27 August 1919. “Tay Đàn Bà Annam Rất Khéo.” TVQGVN Newspapers Collection.

<sup>134</sup> *LTTV* 670 10 September 1919. “Tiệm Annam Giả.” TVQGVN Newspapers Collection.

hesitation, the Vietnamese columnist responded sardonically with four pieces of advice for the “Chinaman”:

1. The Chinese should be grateful to the French for their relaxations in regulating their economic activities and special tax privileges.
2. The Chinese must thank the Vietnamese for their hospitality and tolerance in the face of Chinese exploitation.
3. The Chinese must be humble in their languages, especially during commercial transactions in dealing with the Vietnamese
4. The Chinese must stop abusing their group’s power for shady businesses and abandon their cheating habits.<sup>135</sup>

In the middle of fiery exchanges, a Chinese shopkeeper, Lưu Mậu Ký of Chợ Lớn, sarcastically mocked Vietnamese’s boycott practices as unrealistic and superficial, indicating how he, among other Chinese business owners, still noticed Vietnamese customers, dressed in Western-style clothing, dining at Chinese restaurants in Sài Gòn despite their leaders’ incessant call to stop frequenting Chinese premises. Lưu, in a cynical tone, exclaimed: “So much for Annamite solidarity!” He concluded on a threatening note, claiming to speak for his like-minded “countrymen,” that they would go back to China *en masse*, implying that this would destroy the colonial economy, if widespread harassment in Sài Gòn persisted.<sup>136</sup> On other extreme occasions, Chinese frustration reached such a high point that groups of storeowners would congregate in front of the *Tribune Indigène* office to protest what they viewed as the newspapers’ roles in propagating hatred. On August 25, 1919, peaceful demonstrations turned into violent encounters when seven Chinese men began to destroy properties by throwing bricks through the press office windows.<sup>137</sup>

These ferocious exchanges between the Vietnamese and the Chinese, while revealing the discursive, multi-directional vectors of anti-Chinese discourses, would soon involve French colonists whose position on the boycott remained ambivalent at best. On the one hand, the French

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<sup>135</sup> LTTV 617 20 April 1919. “Tribune Libre : Đáp Hoa Kiều Nhật Báo” [Opinion Column: Reply to the Overseas Chinese Daily]. TVQGVN Newspapers Collection.

<sup>136</sup> LTTV 664 27 August 1919. TVQGVN Newspapers Collection.

<sup>137</sup> *Công Luận Báo* (Henceforth *CLB*) [*The Opinion*], September 9, 1919. TVQGVN Newspapers Collection.



authority was caught in a policy shift and cultural imperative to empower indigenous livelihood, even if only on a rhetorical level, by promising fundamental social and economic changes through education and budget reforms starting in 1917. On the other hand, the rice trade, as previously explained, was a crucial generator of the colonial revenue. Chinese factories, local businesses, and commercial networks remained vital to Cochinchina's wealth. Colonial attempts to quell the disturbance of nationwide boycotts reflected a complex governing conundrum: how to keep Chinese economic foundation afloat and under control during a crisis so that it could continue to function as a scaffolding for colonial capitalism while appearing committed to promises of native civilization?

As a result, French attitudes towards and opinions of the Sino-Vietnamese conflicts oscillated. They first reacted to the outburst of anti-Chinese movements by openly supporting Vietnamese vocal oppositions to Chinese monopoly, lauding their actions as a signifier of “native commercial consciousness” whilst seizing on such opportunity to remind the Chinese of their places in the society. Nguyễn Công Luận, a Vietnamese native emboldened by French support, repeatedly invoked the French civilizing mission to highlight what was then a quite common line of argument: the Chinese, by forgetting their colonial subjecthood, had overstepped their political and economic boundaries. He insisted that the Chinese, by claiming to have brought commercial knowledge and capitalism to Cochinchina, were indirectly undermining the French *mission civilisatrice*, acting as neo-imperialists, and consequently threatening French economic interests. The Vietnamese, in this mode of critique, had tried to pitch the Chinese against the French by not only playing on French long-standing fear of uncurbed Chinese economic power but also by casting the former as the interlopers of empire and the latter as the harbingers of civilization.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> LTTV 617 20 April 1919. “Tribune Libre : Đáp Hoa Kiều Nhật Báo” [Opinion Column: Reply to the Overseas Chinese Daily]. TVQGVN Newspapers Collection.

However, French approaches changed radically when Vietnamese critiques of Chinese presence now shifted to the colonial legal structures and the colonizers themselves. Vietnamese political activism, embedded in an anti-Chinese platform, instilled French fear of a future race riot that could spin out of colonial control and destabilize the colonial economy. The French administration expressed their disapprovals of violence and ultimately cracked down on the movement by dismissing Sino-Vietnamese concerns and framing it as a dangerous precedent of rising native authority and of “granting the native too many political rights.”<sup>139</sup> In March 1919, a Vietnamese representative fulminated against the colonial government for appointing two Chinese and only one Vietnamese official for an important customary post in charge of regulating rice export in the Sài Gòn port. He accused the French of mistreating the Vietnamese by favoring the Chinese, thereby reminding French officials of their civilizational responsibilities and questioning the colonial authority.<sup>140</sup> On other occasions, the Vietnamese challenged French colonial ideology by questioning its legal double standard toward colonial subjects and the Chinese. They proclaimed that the French had intentionally slackened the grip of economic control on the Chinese by allowing them free entries and exits at their will, which encouraged their unrestrained exercises of power. In addition, the Vietnamese also demanded a fair taxation scheme, suggesting that the Chinese should not receive benefits from a separate legal category such as *Asiatique étranger* and be subjected to similar laws as the Annamites.<sup>141</sup> Debates over Chinese monopoly of the rice trade hence brought the important question of colonial and inter-ethnic governance to bear directly on

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<sup>139</sup> *LTTV* 675, 22 September 1919. “Yết Thị” [Announcement]. TVQGVN Newspapers Collection. The Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn administration publicized a notice on behalf of the governor-general of Cochinchina, indicating that the French government did not condone racial violence and commercial conflicts. While the rhetoric implied that the Vietnamese causes were reasonable, it reinforced the French’s role as a mediator of this conflict and a legitimate benefactor of Indochina.

<sup>140</sup> *LTTV* 607 16 March 1919. “Đuột Báo” [Perusing Newspapers]. TVQGVN Newspapers Collection.

<sup>141</sup> *LTTV* 670, 10 September 1919. “Cả Tiếng Kêu Dân Nam Việt” [Annamese Cry for Help]. TVQGVN Newspapers Collection.

the French colonial regime, forcing the public to rearticulate the relationship between the French colonial government, the Chinese, and the Vietnamese at the height of boycott.

***From Rice to National Commerce: Economic Knowledge and Inter-ethnic Relations in the 1920s***

The 1919 anti-Chinese boycott was consequential for the landscape of inter-ethnic relations in the decades that followed. As national identities became an issue of enormous significance to be hashed out by nationalists, a widespread reflection of Vietnamese commercial capability vis-à-vis the Chinese continued to be the thrust of public intellectual engagements. Noted Vietnamese intellectual and statesman Trần Trọng Kim, on his excursion to the city of Hải Ninh (now in the modern-day northern Vietnamese province of Quảng Ninh), wrote a scathing travelogue that depicted its Chinese residents with a *mélange* of conflicting characteristics: diligent and dexterous yet habitually unclean; autonomous yet also clannish; commercially progressive yet socially barbaric. In his observations of Chinese “backward” practices involving wife-selling and improper ancestor worship, Trần Trọng Kim, deploying racially charged language, articulated the danger of being invaded by an opportunistic, greedy, and unassimilable people, and concluded by encouraging the Vietnamese to recuperate their inherent rights in business and commerce.<sup>142</sup>

The rice trade crisis triggered vigorous economic debates on the importance of agriculture to the preservation of national economy and potential changes in Vietnamese attitudes toward trade and commerce. Bryna Goodman, writing about the Chinese production of economic knowledge in extraterritorial Shanghai, articulates the utmost importance of commercial newspapers and printed

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<sup>142</sup> Trần Trọng Kim, “Sự Du Lịch Đất Hải Ninh,” [On Traveling to Hải Ninh] *Nam Phong*, May 1923, Thư Viện Người Việt Newspapers Archive. Cited in Christopher Goscha, “Récits de Voyage Vietnamiens et Prise de Conscience Indochinoise (c. 1920 - c. 1945)” in Claudine Salmon ed., *Récits de Voyages Asiatiques : Genres, Mentalités, Conception de l'espace : actes du colloque EFEO-EHESS de décembre 1994* (Paris : École Française d'Extrême-Orient, 1996). Many thanks to Charles Keith for drawing this source to my attention.

economic journals—developed along the establishment of Shanghai stock markets and trust-funds—to the consolidation of authoritative experts who offered instructive debates on these platforms. Seeking to configure an economic theory that reconciled Western semi-colonial models and Chinese nationalism, these experts carved out a distinct Chinese vision of a national economy imbued with what Goodman theorizes as an essential economics with “Chinese characteristics.”<sup>143</sup>

A similar moment took place in colonial Sài Gòn around this time. By the 1920s, financial institutions had cropped up throughout the city, tying its commercial development to banking and credit operations. The Bank of Indochina, for example, was monumental to the issuance and regulation of the piastre currency in addition to the management of large-scale capital investment. The Chinese were also deeply involved in this sector. Backed by the bank’s financial initiatives and placements of fund, “Chinese consortiums retained their dominant position in commerce and quickly won the rights to administer the state’s opium and alcohol revenue farms.”<sup>144</sup>

This period of unprecedented economic growth lasting from 1923 to 1926 unsurprisingly paralleled an expansion of print capitalism in Sài Gòn. According to Phillippe Peycam, by 1924 “seven Quốc Ngữ newspapers printed an average of 3,000 copies per issue each,” amounting to 20,000 copies in total.<sup>145</sup> During the same period, access to commercial information and the necessity to keep abreast of current economic issues became critical to the public and investors alike. Newspapers’ preoccupation with practical economic knowledge further shifted Sino-Vietnamese relations away from essentialist “barbaric Chinese” discourses and reoriented public

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<sup>143</sup> Bryna Goodman, “Economics with Chinese Characteristics: The Production of Economic Knowledge in Early Republican Shanghai,” in Robert Culp, Eddy U, Wen Hsin-Yeh, ed., *Knowledge Acts in Modern China*, (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California Berkeley), 2016, pp. 177-206.

<sup>144</sup> Gerard Sages, Scott Cheshier, “Competing Legacies: Rupture and Continuity in Vietnamese Political Economy,” *Southeast Asia Research*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (March 2012): 5-33, p. 16.

<sup>145</sup> Phillippe M. F. Peycam, *The Birth of Vietnamese Political Journalism: Sài Gòn, 1916-1930* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

attention to structural economic consequences rooted in Chinese commercial monopoly. As a result, a cascade of debates emerged in the forms of economic rationalities, signaling the influence of an emerging colonial civil society whose vitality rested upon the contributions of intellectuals and experts. To be sure, these emerging discourses were by no means devoid of anti-Sinitic components, but, their participants, cognizant of the shifting economic landscape and by raising their voices, attempted to configure the public sphere and convinced the mass with the soundness of logics and the practicality of self-bettering methods.

A month after the boycott, Chinese rice monopoly resurfaced in public discourse in a new form, provoking a multitude of long-term proposed resolutions in the press. Mộng Huê Lầu drafted an extensive, multi-stage commercial strategy and argued that keys to early Chinese's successful seizures of Cochinchinese grains prior to harvest were their exclusive economic networks and racial solidarity, providing them with privileged access to both information and resources. A similar outcome, he insisted, could be achieved only if "the Vietnamese come together to develop the same institutions with comparable modes of operation." Mộng Huê Lầu outlined six steps that could make this possible. First, each province must petition its provincial chiefs to grant permission to the establishment of Vietnamese-run rice-trading organizations (*Tâm Bồn Mễ Thương*). On such foundation, Vietnamese landowners must act in the spirit of national unity by resisting selling rice to the principal market before contributing at least 50 hectares of grains to a common fund (*Vốn Chung*). Accounting records will keep track of these contributions; those donated to the mutual fund by virtue signed an agreement that prevented them from selling grains to any middlemen outside of this circle. This process, as proposed, also involved rigorous background checks to ensure no infiltrating (Chinese) outsiders could access these grains. Finally, once a sizeable provincial concentration of grains was to be realized, the Vietnamese would

consolidate their own sources, retake their portions of lost market shares, and therefore control the pricing, instead of relying on the unpredictable flux and flow of traditional Chinese-led systems.<sup>146</sup>

In the meantime, journalist Nguyễn Thế Ngọc took advantage of the discourse on the rice trade to ponder the role of agriculture in Cochinchina. Suggesting that agricultural production via farming and rice cultivation formed the core of the Vietnamese identity for a thousand of years, Nguyễn contrasted past histories of national economic prosperity with the changing situation of the present, referring to the conditions of Chinese oppression that undermined Vietnamese economic improvements. While mysteriously leaving French colonialism out of the equation, Nguyễn's quandary hinted at a gloomy future for Cochinchina's economy that necessitated a shift in Vietnamese mentalities. With vindication, Nguyễn proclaimed that if the only thing that the Vietnamese were skillful at—namely agricultural matters—was no longer sufficient to sustain their livelihood, why stick to it only to hit a dead end? He encouraged young Vietnamese to familiarize themselves with modern technology. Those with no farmland should take seriously the art of commerce. Above all, Nguyễn Thế Ngọc contended that the Vietnamese must repudiate their conservative attitudes and be flexible in supporting themselves economically.<sup>147</sup>

Vietnamese reflections upon their lack of economic knowledge were an acute response to what many had bemoaned in public debates as a concern with ungovernable Chinese-led institutions that protected their community interests and hindered Vietnamese development. The founding of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce in Chợ Lớn in 1910, for example, garnered much interest from Vietnamese capitalists, which later motivated Southern nationalists to create a short-

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<sup>146</sup> *LTTV* 672 15 September 1919. “Tâm Bồn Tân Thương. Annam Xin Ghé Mất, Ghi Để Kế Lâu Dài” [On New Approaches to Commercial Practices. Annamese, Consider and Plan on Long-Term Strategies]. TVQGVN Newspapers Collection.

<sup>147</sup> *CLB* 554 29 December 1922. “Dân Nam Kỳ Ta Có Nên Ý Lại Một Nghề Nông Chẳng?” [Should We Southerners Stick to Agriculture?]. TVQGVN Newspapers Collection.

lived Annamese bank that would provide support to Vietnamese economic initiatives.<sup>148</sup> In the event of a new Chinese consulate being established in Sài Gòn, Cao Văn Chánh reacted to the news with hysteria, arguing that this would result in a loss of Vietnamese economic sovereignty while securing Chinese commercial foothold in Vietnam with French protections. He characterized Chinese enclaves hyperbolically a small nation within a larger nation (*quốc gia nhỏ trong quốc gia lớn*).<sup>149</sup>

In the last six months of 1922 and early 1923, a new discussion topic gradually gained traction in a few major southern newspapers such as *Công Luận Báo* and *Nam Kỳ Kinh Tế Báo*. These conversations, centered on the discourse of escaping from the yoke of Chinese economic domination (*Thoát Trung*), embodied Vietnamese effort to arm themselves with better economic knowledge in order to overcome Chinese predominance. On August 18, 1922, a *Công Luận* article meditated on the techniques of escaping Chinese influences. Evoking the events of the 1919 boycott and footnoting it as an evidence of yet-to-be-resolved Chinese problem and Vietnamese ineffective political mobilization against economic oppression, such article diagnoses the root of the issue, pointing out Annamite's lack of practical economic skills and their failure to adapt to the changing economic landscape of Sài Gòn. Ultimately, it promoted commercial education via the establishment of *école commerciale* and advocated for the opening of more vocational schools, arguing that this would fill the gap of the *connaissance générale* education one normally received. Most importantly, the article concluded with a call for Vietnamese capitalists to encourage their children to go study abroad in France and specialize in commercially oriented subjects.<sup>150</sup> Around

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<sup>148</sup> Christopher E. Goscha, "Widening the Colonial Encounter: Asian Connections Inside French Indochina During the Interwar Period," *Modern Asian Studies* 43, no. 5 (September 2009): 1189–1228.

<sup>149</sup> CLB 17 January 1922. "Nghị Về Đặt Quán Lãnh Sự, Tàu ở Sài Gòn và Hà Nội" [On the Establishment of the Chinese Consulates in Sài Gòn and Hà Nội]. TVQGVN Newspapers Collection.

<sup>150</sup> CLB 520 18 August 1922. "Muốn Thoát Ly Ách Kinh Tế China Phải Làm Thế Nào?" [How to Escape from Chinese Economic Domination?]. TVQGVN Newspapers Collection.

the same time, the chief-editor (*Chủ Bút*) of the *Nam Kỳ Kinh Tế Báo*<sup>151</sup>, Cao Văn Chánh, launched a two-part series to tackle similar issues, which braced the front pages of the newspapers. In it, he argued for the *sine qua non* of a representative body that stood up for Vietnamese interests since, unlike the Chinese, the Vietnamese lacked an awareness and knowledge of economic issues. It turned out that the political body that Cao suggested was none other than the *Nam Kỳ Kinh Tế Báo* itself<sup>152</sup>, which he insisted would be an essential promotional economic organ (*Cơ Quan Cổ Động Kinh tế*) to shake up the Vietnamese consciousness and equip them with the timely knowledge to effectively compete with the Chinese.<sup>153</sup>

Finally, as a counter-argument to those advocating the enrollments of the Vietnamese in commercial and vocation schools, *Nam Kỳ Kinh Tế Báo*, from 1923 to 1924, continued to urge the public to dissect this problem from different angles of ethics, civility, and proclivity in commercial conducts. While the newspapers did not entirely reject the utility of school-taught commercial knowledge, it complicated this debate by pointing out that the Chinese were adept at commerce, but the majority of them did not learn these skills at school. Rather, it was a persistent “trial and error” process of cumulative experiences. Here, one recommended against uncritical enrollments in these institutions, but rather encourage only those who discovered their knacks for businesses and passion for commerce to follow this path.<sup>154</sup> In other instances, the newspapers devoted to

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<sup>151</sup> *Nam Kỳ Kinh Tế Báo* [*The Southern Economic Journal*] (Henceforth *NKKTB*) was a major economic newspaper in Cochinchina bought by Nguyễn Hảo Vĩnh—a former writer of the *Công Luận Báo*. It dealt with a wide range of issues including mainly economic matters but also international politics and beyond. The newspapers was overtly anti-colonial. For detailed history, see Philippe M. F. Peycam, *The Birth of Vietnamese Political Journalism: Sài Gòn, 1916-1930* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), pp. 106-108. TVQGVN Newspapers Collection.

<sup>152</sup> *NKKTB* 109 26 February 1923. “Một Cái Cơ Quan Cứu Nước Cho Khỏi Ách Kinh Tế Tàu (I)” [On an Anti-Chinese Economic Organ (I)]. TVQGVN Newspapers Collection.

<sup>153</sup> *NKKTB* 111 28 February 1923. “Một Cái Cơ Quan Cứu Nước Cho Khỏi Ách Kinh Tế Tàu (II)” [On an Anti-Chinese Economic Organ (II)]. TVQGVN Newspapers Collection.

<sup>154</sup> *NKKTB* 09 May 1923. “Có Tư Cách Bán Buôn Mới Nên Bán Buôn (I)” [Only Those with Commercial Aptitude Should Do Business (I)]. TVQGVN Newspapers Collection.



teaching practical knowledge to its readers. These included, for example, the meaning of trust and punctuality in business,<sup>155</sup> the importance of keeping promises (*Giữ Chữ Tín*),<sup>156</sup> and the courtesy and determination required to maintain long-term commercial relationships with potential economic partners.<sup>157</sup>

## Conclusion

From the beginning of French colonization in Cochinchina until the early twentieth century, Chinese commercial institutions centered on the colonial rice trade with its exclusive means of production, international networks, and intricate sets of quotidian economic relationships with French colonists and colonized Vietnamese remained a central component of not only colonial capitalism but also of colonial ideology and governance in Vietnam. Far from being politically indifferent, obedient tradesmen, or passive receiver of French ideas about modernity and progress, Chợ Lớn's Chinese rice merchants took advantage of their dominant positions in the colonial rice trade, which entailed growing networks of export that sustained colonial capitalism on a trans-regional scale and their domestic roles as essential urban-rural intermediaries, to push back against French intrusive tariff policies. Contrary to predominant Vietnamese nationalist narratives emerging in the postwar periods that cast Chinese communities as “evil capitalists” and “empire’s collaborators,” the fraught Sino-French debates over control of the Chinese rice trade reveal a tenaciously ambiguous relationship that continued to define, influence, and exacerbate the contradictions of colonial rule into the twentieth century.

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<sup>155</sup> *NKKTB* 27 December 1923. “Có Tư Cách Bán Buôn Mới Nên Bán Buôn (II)” [Only Those with Commercial Aptitude Should Do Business (II)]. TVQGVN Newspapers Collection.

<sup>156</sup> *NKKTB* 03 January 1924. “Có Tư Cách Bán Buôn Mới Nên Bán Buôn (III)” [Only Those with Commercial Aptitude Should Do Business (III)]. TVQGVN Newspapers Collection.

<sup>157</sup> *NKKTB* 10 January 1924. “Có Tư Cách Bán Buôn Mới Nên Bán Buôn (IV)” [Only Those with Commercial Aptitude Should Do Business (IV)]. TVQGVN Newspapers Collection.

But the history of Chinese participation in the rice trade was part and parcel of inextricably linked narratives of urbanization and inter-ethnic interactions in French Cochinchina and colonial Vietnam writ large. As the Chinese rice trade “profoundly shaped the lives of those who lived in colonial Sài Gòn,”<sup>158</sup> it also further exposed constantly shifting undercurrents of racial and economic tension in the urban milieus of Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn when the 1919 Southeast Asian rice crisis disturbed an already-precarious economy and provoked waves of Sino-Vietnamese discontent that came to configure Chinese migrants’ relationship to the colonial state and indigenous Vietnamese. Rooted in the context of Sài Gòn as a crucial node of the transnational rice trade and emergent “spaces of possibilities”<sup>159</sup> brought about by a modern vernacular press under the transformative force of colonialism, anti-Chinese discourses, manifested first in the Vietnamese boycott movement and then in systematic reflections of native commercial and political strategies to subvert Chinese monopoly, were more than a simple-minded, racist attack on a migrant community. Rather, as I have argued through an in-depth interrogation of the built-in structural dependency of colonial capitalism on the Chinese trade and the persisting problems such system created for both the native and Chinese migrants alike, Sino-Vietnamese racial tension reflected foremostly a complex and wide-arrayed agenda coming from a growing educated Vietnamese public to reconfigure their relationship to a colonized society fraught with racial inequality, economic oppression, and ambiguous identities. In an effort to cope with these drastic, sometimes cataclysmic, shifts in the moment of high French colonialism, they engaged French colonialists and Chinese migrants in questions over racial hierarchies, Chinese economic dominance, and Vietnamese nationalism.

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<sup>158</sup> Cherry, *Down and Out in Sài Gòn*, p. 28.

<sup>159</sup> Philippe Peycam, “From the Social to the Political: 1920s Colonial Sài Gòn as a ‘Space of Possibilities’ in Vietnamese Consciousness,” *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 21, no. 3 (September 15, 2013): 496–546.

Scholarship on Chinese migration in Vietnam and histories of colonialism tends to neglect the cultural and political dimensions of the Chinese trade and its ramifications for inter-ethnic relations and urbanization. As one of the venues of contentious politics, the Chinese rice trade generated a key conundrum for the colonial political economy and society, forcing French colonialists to reckon with imperial ethnic governance and native economic betterment. Unexpectedly, while attempting to alienate the Chinese and relegate them to the mere position of outsiders and exploiters of the colonial economy, anti-Chineseness also created room for Chinese diasporic engagement in local politics and Vietnamese critical self-reflections on wider social issues centered on autonomous possibilities of Vietnamese economic development. Sino-Vietnamese political engagements also resulted in their uneasy and ambivalent relationship with the French, especially when it had become clear that Vietnamese political activism, by mounting criticisms against the Chinese, was on the brink of undermining French authority and that Chinese communities would have to pressure French colonists, as benefactors of Chinese wealth, to protect themselves against political repression.

## CHAPTER II

### **Addicts, Gamblers, and Criminals: Underground Chinese Networks and the Making of Sino-French Relations**

*“In sweet dreams, in crazy dreams,  
Sleep inducing opium, killer of suffering,  
Takes his heart, his crazy but gentle heart,  
To the illusive world of fantasies,*

*He wanders, he walks in golden visions  
In the gay reveries of a frolicking dance.  
As Kong-phu-tseu still ponders  
The cadence of verses with a sacred rhythm*

*He tells himself that the soul is but a whiff of air, nothing  
A lock of hair in a light breeze;  
That it is fine to die, but that living is good, too,  
And that opium kills the misery.”*  
—Victor Le Lan<sup>1</sup>

*“The Chinese who live here, restless and very bustling  
[...are] almost all single men [who] come and go  
without cease, as their business demands, smoke opium,  
gamble frenetically, and engage in daily  
brawling...[They] form an agitated, turbulent mass,  
requiring an energetic government, and strict  
regulations.”*  
—Lucien de Grammont<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps no other commodity enjoyed a longer history of economic and political transformation than opium. Coming to Asia as early as the eighth century via the Arab trade route that linked the Indian Ocean to the Southeast Asian peninsula, opium had since evolved not only from an exotic commodity of constantly shifting utilities, but also to an integral part of the global capitalist structure and empire-building. The global opium trade offered lucrative benefits to any

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<sup>1</sup> Victor Le Lan, “Opium,” in *La Vie Indochinoise*, 16 January, 1897. Translated by Michael G. Vann.

<sup>2</sup> Lucien de Grammont, *Onze mois de sous-préfecture en Basse-Cochinchine* (n. pub., 1863), p. 104 cited and translated by Nola Cooke in “The Heaven and Earth Society Upsurge in Early 1880s French Cochinchina,” *Chinese Southern Diaspora Studies*, Vol. 4, 2010: (42-73), p. 47.

parties involved in its enterprises: the colonial government and trading companies, local intermediaries, and secret society contingents—narcotic traffickers and their accomplices, smugglers, and coastal pirates in the littoral regions. The Dutch East India Company's (*Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie* or VOC) ventured into the Indonesian archipelago and brought opium to Java through the trading networks that originated from Bengal India in the early seventeenth century. However, the VOC's opium predominance began only when it won over a monopoly decree granted by the King of Mataram of central Java in 1677, which afforded the Dutch a complete control of opium importation.<sup>3</sup>

However, the Dutch's competitive advantage over the opium trade was soon undermined by the presence of the British East India Company in Bengal and Calcutta wherein the mass-production of opium and movements of country traders to Southeast Asia undercut the VOC's monopoly. The Anglo-Dutch War in 1757, also known as the Battle of Plassey, put a final verdict on the fate of the VOC when it collapsed and finally went bankrupt in 1799.<sup>4</sup> This officially marked a new phase of British monopoly of opium trades in the triangle of India, China, and Southeast Asia with Singapore being a critical British entrepôt along the route. Chinese traders must have come into contact with the British traders around this time.<sup>5</sup> A new global situation emerged: the opium trade now not only included Canton and Hong Kong in its extensive route, but also involved China into a capital-driven enterprise of opium commercialization and the rise of opium revenue farms in Southeast Asia, most notably in French Indochina, the Dutch East Indies, and Singapore.

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<sup>3</sup> Luijk, van .W Eric, "The Effects of Government Policy on Drug Uses: Java, 1875-1904", (*The Journal of Economic History*, Vol. 61, No. 1, March 2001), pp. 1-18.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 3

<sup>5</sup> Trocki, Carl, "Opium as a Commodity in the Chinese Nanyang Trade", in *Chinese Circulations, Capital, Commodities, and Networks in Southeast Asia*, ed. Eric Tagliacozzo and Wen-Chin Chang, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 84.

Another important Chinese settlement in Southeast Asia, French Cochinchina picked up the momentum of an ever-expanding interregional narcotic trade in which nearby British Singapore had laid the groundwork and provided a ready-made model for revenue extraction—a goal that French colonists aspired to achieve in light of the lack of metropolitan financial support in the aftermath of the first wave of conquest. Elsewhere in Southeast Asia, as mentioned, the VOC already had a hand-on experiment with Chinese intermediaries and the synergetic economic model of competitive bidding which paved the way for Chinese economic expansion and their ability to capitalize on a massive consumer market that involved not only Chinese but also a large proportion of non-Chinese smokers in that region.<sup>6</sup> The story of Cochinchinese opium and the wealth it generated for the colonial state did not diverge too far from this common narrative. In the early years of their formation, revenue farms and the sizeable budget they required to maintain contingent labor and distribution networks would become too overwhelming at times to a newly established colonial state with a shaky administrative and economic foundation. Owing to early initiatives of a syndicate of affluent transnational Chinese capitalists—most with Straits origins—who made their fortunes by riding the waves of colonial modernization through investments in auxiliary trade, between 1861 and 1879, the nascent French government in Cochinchina derived more than thirty percent of its budget from opium revenue farms.<sup>7</sup> Without a doubt, the production of opium, complex webs of trading networks, and the intensive developments of opium farming infrastructure in the colony intensified its drive toward globalization where French colonial policies clashed with existing Chinese institutions striving to respond to the pressure of regulation and competition. Opium and the associative vice industries it created were inseparable from

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<sup>6</sup> Leonard Blussé, “Batavia, 1619–1740: The Rise and Fall of a Chinese Colonial Town,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 12, no. 1 (March 1981): 159–78.

<sup>7</sup> Chantal Descours-Gatin, *Quand l’opium finançait la colonisation en Indochine: l’élaboration de la régie générale de l’opium, 1860 à 1914* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1992), p. 101.

colonial empire-building and modern state-formation. They exemplified early interactions and contestations of political actors, drawing members from all levels of the society—French colonizers, indigenous elites, diasporic Chinese merchants, revenue farmers and secret societies—into the encounters. It is thus Chinese networks and their relationships to colonial institutions that form the core interest of this chapter.

Providing a closer examination of Chinese transnational Chinese economic practices in the opium trade and gambling businesses, this chapter explore a few core questions that speak to the larger theoretical concerns of this dissertation: how did these Chinese merchant elites and their inter-Asian networks in Cochinchina interact with the French colonial state as it tried, initially without much success, to govern Chinese-dominated “vice” industries, including opium and gambling, and maneuver their developments in its favor? How did Chinese underground networks and “informal economy” shape colonial legal practices and approaches to inter-ethnic administration? And ultimately, what kind of relationship emerge between a consolidating French colonial state and Chinese migrant communities through our examination of Chinese “illicit” institutions and colonial policing?

I argue that Chinese migrants served not only as essential local agents in Cochinchina’s opium farms and gambling networks but also as the precipitators of inter-Asian commerce that sustained the French colonial empire. Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn’s deep entanglement with the Southeast Asian drug trade and its subsequent dependence on an informal economy as an outgrowth of this commercial structure provided an opportunity to reconceptualize colonial capitalism not only as a process of mere exploitative extraction, but also as a complex multifaceted project of cooptation, accommodation, and negotiation between French colonists and Chinese capitalists. As I shall demonstrate, the ambiguity of colonial rule that undergirded French policy reformulations enabled

Chinese merchants to penetrate the colonial political system. Emboldened by their ties to secret societies, Chinese capitalists were able to navigate and bypass French economic and legal structures. As a part of exploring this relationship, we now turn to some background on Chinese secret societies and how they became the foundation for Chinese-led commerce in Cochinchina.

### **Chinese Secret Societies and Colonial Relations**

On May 23, 1908, a scene of horror made shockwaves through Indochina. A murdered Chinese man's corpse floated to the surface of the Hải Phòng river and was fished up by some nearby boatmen. The French police took no time to jump into the investigation, but was unable to find any trace of the perpetrators. Calling to mind that a similar incident took place recently in Sài Gòn where another Chinese man had his hand cut off on a public street, a police officer warily commented, "the crime was the work of the notorious Triad Society." This "Chinaman" suffering from the "handiwork of Chinese secret society" refused to reveal any information to the French detective, fearing brutal retaliation from society members in Chợ Lớn. According to a report from the *Avenir de Tonkin*, the colonial police was helpless against these active organizations, which remained "a power in the land, and that nothing, save rumors, ever reach the public ear about what passes at their meeting." This French source also reveals that Chinese secret society's membership was diverse, including Chinese people from all walks of life—servants, native headmen, and even notables.<sup>8</sup>

Secret societies' presence in Vietnam had been a familiar feature of the southern historical landscape since the arrivals of traders, pirates, and bandit, which paralleled with the earliest wave of Chinese mass migration to the South towards the collapse of the Ming dynasty in China in 1644.

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<sup>8</sup> "Indochina Secret Societies. Powerlessness of the Police Against Triad Organization," *The Straits Times*, 23 May 1908, NewspaperSG, NLB.



Before the colonial conquests, these “social outcasts” or those who lived on the margin of precolonial society were the essential collaborative forces mobilized by various governing regimes to fight on their behalf. The short-lived Tây Sơn regime, for example, relied on the financial resources and mobilizational efforts channeled from ethnic Chinese traders’ networks to expand its military force. Many of these Chinese were important members of a longstanding coastal trading communities whose links with the Triad societies in China consolidated this emerging anti-Nguyễn polity coalition.<sup>9</sup> Wang Wensheng further shows that the formation of such a coalition also had a direct impact on the southern Chinese coast where Chinese pirates and the White Lotus rebels took advantage of the power vacuum created by the Tây Sơn regime and their support in southern Vietnam to attempt an overthrow of the Qing emperor in the early 1800s.<sup>10</sup> While the Nguyễn dynasty, particularly on the eve of emperor Tự Đức reign, imposed draconian laws on underground Chinese societies to curb their influences, a series of French conquests in the Mekong Delta and the anti-colonial feelings they generated among a floating and diverse population resulted in a “recrudescence of disturbances caused by Triad affiliates.”<sup>11</sup> In French Cochinchina, the intertwinement of Chinese secret societies into the social, cultural, and economic fabric of southern Vietnamese life, especially its history as a fixture in the context of urban Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn thus cannot be understated. Ho-Tai Hue-Tam’s seminal work on millenarianism in Vietnam, highlighting the tripartite dimensions of these fraternal societies—as religious organizations, politically active entities, and mutual aid associations—demonstrates how secret societies attracted an eclectic following in the economically volatile and porous region of the Mekong Delta,

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<sup>9</sup> George Edson Dutton, *The Tây Sơn Uprising: Society and Rebellion in Eighteenth-Century Vietnam*, Southeast Asia--Politics, Meaning, and Memory (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2006), pp.41-42.

<sup>10</sup> Wang Wensheng, “Prosperity and Its Discontents: Contextualizing Social Protest in the Late Qianlong Reign,” *Frontiers of History in China* 6, no. 3 (September 2011): 347–69, pp. 352-353.

<sup>11</sup> Nguyễn Thế Anh, “Secret Societies: Some Reflections on the Court of Hue and the Government of Cochinchina on the Eve of Tu-Duc’s Death (1882–1883),” *Asian Affairs* 9, no. 2 (June 1, 1978): 179–85, p. 180.

ultimately holding a near-monopoly on southern Vietnamese anti-colonial resistance by the late nineteenth century.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, the power of secret societies, as scholars of empire and Chinese migration show, lay in its often condemned yet indispensable roles in the political economy that sustained colonial capitalism.<sup>13</sup> This feature was especially acute in the case of Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn where a thriving commercial economy rested in the hands of Chinese networks and formed the basis of colonial wealth. In the aftermath of the French conquest, as an apathetic Parisian government's willingness to further invest in the colonial project began to dissipate, the nascent colonial administration was forced to turn to the local economy and networks for sources of revenue. An existing "informal" economy, paved out and managed by a visible Chinese population in Vietnam, provided the perfect graft for colonial capitalistic endeavors: colonists became increasingly reliant on commodity taxes, not only on the three "beasts of burden"—alcohol, salt, and opium—but also on growing "vice" industries—gambling and prostitution—with the latter especially tied to the activities of secret societies.<sup>14</sup> Consequently, this renders the close and contested relationship between underground Chinese networks and French rule an undetachable component of colonial politics and Franco-Chinese relations, evidenced in a remark made by a

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<sup>12</sup> Hue-Tam Ho Tai, *Millenarianism and Peasant Politics in Vietnam*, Harvard East Asian Series 99 (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1983).

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Carl Trocki, "A Drug on the Market: Opium and the Chinese in Southeast Asia, 1750–1880," *Journal of Chinese Overseas* 1, no. 2 (January 1, 2005): 147–68; Carl A. Trocki, *Opium, Empire, and the Global Political Economy: A Study of the Asian Opium Trade, 1750-1950*, Asia's Transformations (London ; New York: Routledge, 1999); Robert James Antony, "Pirates, Bandits, and Brotherhoods: A Study of Crime and Law in Kwangtung Province, 1796-1839," PhD Thesis, University of Hawaii at Manoa (1989); Robert J. Antony, ed., *Elusive Pirates, Pervasive Smugglers: Violence and Clandestine Trade in the Greater China Seas* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010).

<sup>14</sup> Melissa Louise Anderson, "For 'the Love of Order': Race, Violence, and the French Colonial Police in Vietnam, 1860s-1920s" PhD Dissertation. University of Wisconsin Madison (2015), pp. 254-256. Both Micheline Lessard and Christina Firpo have recently unearthed networks of prostitution and human trafficking in colonial Vietnam with a significant Chinese component to them. See Micheline R Lessard, *Human Trafficking in Colonial Vietnam* (London: Routledge, 2017) and Christina Elizabeth Firpo, *Black Market Business: Selling Sex in Northern Vietnam, 1920-1945*, Studies of the Weatherhead East Asian Institute, Columbia University (Ithaca [New York]: Cornell University Press, 2020) .

befuddling reporter in the event of the civil violence wrecking the colonial city towards the end of the First Indochina War where Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn's nightlife, much to the author's surprise, was largely spared from the destructive rampage:

This French city in Asia shuts down nightly at 9 P.M, but its twin city of Chợ Lớn, almost entirely Chinese, keeps wide awake until the 1 A.M curfew. Strangely enough, both opposing Vietnamese governments in the civil war in French Indochina are apparently supported financially by the nightlife of Chợ Lớn...Most European residents of Sài Gòn, as well as Vietnamese and Chinese who prefer to keep awake during the evening hours, drive the three miles to the center of Chợ Lớn. There, they join the wide-open city with its gambling, dancing, opium-smoking and what not going full blast. The authorities tolerate these activities. In fact, gambling receipts help keep the new state of Vietnam (Bao Dai's French-sponsored regime) financially solvent.<sup>15</sup>

The synonymity between secret societies' identities and Chinese migrants was a late-nineteenth century product of the racio-political conflation of French increasingly repressive panoptic apparatuses targeted at Chinese mobility in the fulfillment of racialized colonial capitalist imperatives and the expansion of the colonial state. Suppressing underground Chinese activities exhibits the effort of the colonial state to curb Chinese economic strength while simultaneously, as Thomas Martin argues, managing special economic interests pertinent to the proper functioning of empire.<sup>16</sup> In Indochina, this included, among others, commercial trade, head taxes, and foreign political influences. At the same time, much less understood in the historiography of Vietnam and inter-ethnic administration in port cities, the stereotypical assumption that French colonists subscribed to and propagated which equated secret societies to the need for stringent regulations of Chinese migrants was also a product of class differentiations within the Chinese community itself wherein wealthy Chinese sought to distance themselves from these "low-life and unlawful" compatriots in the interest of being law-abiding citizens in the French colony. The existence of Chinese secret societies thus tapped into the root of an uncomfortable situation, or, as I call it, a

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<sup>15</sup> "Life is One Long Gamble," *The Straits Times*, 16 February 1950. NewspaperSG, NLB.

<sup>16</sup> Martin Thomas, *Violence and Colonial Order: Police, Workers and Protest in the European Colonial Empires, 1918-1940*, (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

double irony of colonial rule: the French disgust for subversive, yet economically potent, elements that stood in its expansionist vision and Chinese congregational leader's conflicting desire for social and political stability while seeking to benefit from these informal networks. It is important to re-emphasize a crucial fact here that essential revenues derived from Chinese capitation, gambling, and opium taxes remained profitable to the colonial state. Incomes from gambling tax itself, for example, accounted for 360,000 francs out of the 1,100,000 total in treasury profits by the 1880s.<sup>17</sup>

In addition to operating along the axes of colonial imperatives, Chinese secret societies were consistently viewed as dangerous and subversive elements, often linked to clandestine Chinese organizations in Indochina. Wrestling with the existence of organized underground networks of contraband and smuggling of goods into the territory of Cochinchina through the port of Sài Gòn, orchestrated by secret societies remained the colonial state's perennial battles. For instance, a French custom officer reported to the Lieutenant-Governor in 1893 that a Teochew Chinese named Trịnh Thuận, along with other migrants, made a suspicious 6-day trip from Sài Gòn to Singapore, carrying unusually large sets of belongings. On the advice of the French immigration police, Thuận was directed to a custom booth to fulfill custom declaration formalities, including a thorough background and baggage check. Upon further examination, French police discovered a large quantity of smuggled goods—mainly expensive clothing items and luxuries—hidden beneath thick layers of blankets. Thuận's testimonies, recorded after rounds of interrogation, exposed a systematic ring of smugglers whom, with the assistance of "internal organizations", was able to bypass custom police's regulations, dodge obligatory duties, and import rare items into French

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<sup>17</sup> Procès-Verbaux, Conseil Colonial, Séance du Novembre 20, 1880 (Sài Gòn : Imprimerie du Gouvernement, 1881), p. 89. Cited in Melissa Louise Anderson, "For 'the Love of Order': Race, Violence, and the French Colonial Police in Vietnam, 1860s-1920s," p. 259.

Cochinchina. These smugglers' operations relied on a network of individual agents—usually male passengers who received a small fee to cross the borders and bring back products as personal items—and middlemen who arranged lodging and food to facilitate the works of these agents.<sup>18</sup> As Thuận confessed, “when a Chinese merchant wants to import goods into Cochinchina in fraud, he goes to an inn in the proximity of the embarkation port where all the immigrants usually meet, delegate their next trips, and assign duties to new ‘recruits.’”<sup>19</sup> Most strikingly, Thuận's account indicated that most of these recruits would not know which “illicit” goods they were to carry in exchange for a small profit per immigrant's head as long as they declared to be the rightful owners of these parcels. The value of goods that sled through the border without any imposed custom duties (had the smuggling ring not been caught) was estimated to be roughly 25,000 to 30,000 francs by the French authority. In fact, one of the merchants, Huỳnh Quốc Trịnh, was caught red-handed for importing goods illegally into the French colony by each small quantity in April of the same year, thus leading the French into a frenzy of heightened border search and alarming the French police about other possible clandestine networks to undermine the colonial legal order.

In the history of Cochinchina and southern Vietnam at large, Chinese secret societies' presence thus permeated every aspect of its local and trans-regional political economy. In the opium business, they collaborated with wealthy Chinese revenue farm syndicates for a share of the thriving market and formed an important component of a shadowy “illicit” economy, which, remained crucial to our understanding of colonial capitalism and the functioning of Chinese

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<sup>18</sup> My narrative here was synthesized from a series of events that took place in September 1893 that drew on the correspondence between the French police and the Governor-General of Cochinchina, testimonies of Chinese convicts, and trial reports in *Dossier Relatif aux Activités de la Chambre de Commerce de Sài Gòn Année 1883-1901* [Files Relating to the Activities of the Sài Gòn Chamber of Commerce 1883-1901], GOUCOCH L.13 N5554, TTLTQG-II, HCMC.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. Correspondence with the Lieutenant-Governor of Cochinchina, 12 September 1893, GOUCOCH L.13 N5554, TTLTQG-II, HCMC.

networks within its framework. Building on the success and connections from the structure of opium commerce, secret societies were also further involved in lucrative Chinese gambling houses, which posed multifaceted governing challenges to the French authority in the long twentieth century. We now turn to the first site of struggle—opium revenue farms—to explore the roles of Chinese capitalists in the inter-regional drug trade wherein Cochinchina remained a central domain and the evolution of French policies that shaped their relationship to Chinese migrant communities herein.

### **Addicts: Opium Revenue Farms, Inter-Asian Networks, and Disorders**

#### ***Opium Revenue Farm Bosses: Wang-Tai, Ban-Hap, and the Fates of the Chinese Syndicate***

In 1875, a terrified French missionary recalled a unique encounter with Vietnamese and Chinese opium addicts during his short visit to Cochinchina. Browsing along the edge of a narrow path, he came across a staggering Vietnamese man, whom he described as “a walking Annamite skeleton.” As his curiosity peaked, he asked himself in befuddlement: “which evil could possibly have reduced a man to this emaciated form?” The Vietnamese man then told the missionary that he was an opium smoker. A few days later, the missionary made another visit to the Chinese quarter. Taken aback by a very different experience, he exclaimed with conundrums and in utter disbelief:

I was struck by the smell emanated from the Chinese merchants. In order to educate myself, I kept asking my superiors about the reasons that explained why opium did not produce, among the Chinese, the same physiological effects as on the “Annamite skeleton” whom I met sometime before and how was it possible that this one looked so miserable while those [the Chinese] seemed so exuberant of health and life...I speculated that it could have been the opium compound used in their pharmacopoeia, their habits of smoking, or hygiene. As a result, I have since wanted to know Chinese methods of producing and storing opium and what their effects were.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> « Causerie Sur L’Opium. Par M. J.-B. Clair, *Missionnaire en Cochinchine Occidentale*, » Missions Etrangères de Paris. Auteur du texte. *Annales des Missions Etrangères de Paris*, 1909, pp. 10-11.

The missionary's commentary above reflected French growing fascination with and concerns about widespread Chinese opium smoking habits in Indochina. It also overlapped with a crucial period of French rule in colonial Vietnam wherein an underfunded colonial state with its provisional regime began to turn to opium as a source of income through indirect taxes on consumption. Following the early model that had been established in British Singapore, rights to opium tax farms were acquired through competitive bidding processes in which, often much to the chagrins of French investors, Chinese businessmen tended to win the privilege to operate the trade and supply opium on a local level.<sup>21</sup> Scholars have shown that opium was the “cash-cow” that financed the creation of Indochina and colonized Southeast Asian states writ large.<sup>22</sup> Revenue generated from opium licenses brought in from 500,000 to about 1,5 million francs to Indochina between 1862 and 1865. This number rose dramatically to 3.2 million francs by 1877.<sup>23</sup> “If the income from gambling and prostitution monopolies is added to this,” Christopher Goscha writes, “Cochinchina reaped 4.2 million francs in monopoly income in 1878, and 6.7 million in 1881.”<sup>24</sup> According to a report conducted by the Philippine Commission on opium consumption in Southeast Asia, the system of opium monopoly, which was now in the hands of the Bureau of Customs and Excise, generated a large revenue for Cochinchina at the turn of the twentieth century. “In 1902, 63,183.7 kilos of Yunnan opium and 86,440 kilos of Benares opium were imported into

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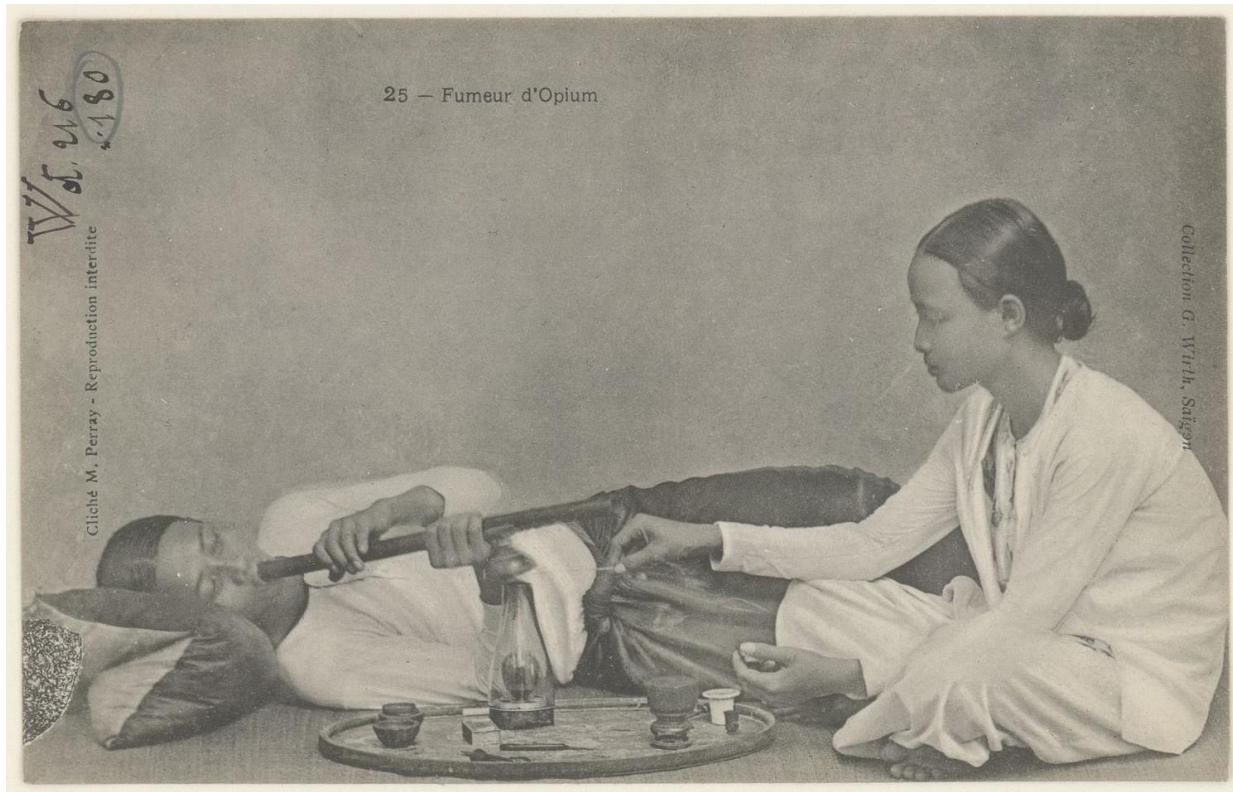
<sup>21</sup> Diana S Kim, *Empires of Vice: The Rise of Opium Prohibition across Southeast Asia*, (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020), p. 158; On the opium trade in British Singapore and the Singaporean model, see Carl Trocki, *Opium, Empire, and the Global Political Economy*, (London: Routledge, 1999); and Stan Neal, *Singapore, Chinese Migration and the Making of the British Empire, 1819-67*, (Cambridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2019).

<sup>22</sup> Carl A. Trocki, “Drugs, Taxes, and Chinese Capitalism in Southeast Asia,” in Timothy Brook and Bob Tadashi Wakabayashi, eds., *Opium Regimes: China, Britain, and Japan, 1839-1952* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), p. 79.

<sup>23</sup> Chantal Descours-Gatin, *Quand l’opium finançait la colonisation en Indochine: l’élaboration de la régie générale de l’opium, 1860 à 1914* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1992), pp. 97-102.

<sup>24</sup> Christopher E. Goscha, *The Penguin History of Modern Vietnam* ([London], UK: Allen Lane, an imprint of Penguin Books, 2016), p. 77.

Cochinchina. The monopoly brings in from 9.500,000 piastres to 16,000,000 piastres yearly, the difference due mainly to differences in the rice crop, the sale of which furnishes the means with which to buy opium.”<sup>25</sup>



**Figure 9:** Opium Smokers in Cochinchina, c.1906

*Source: 195 cartes postales d'Inde, Birmanie, Indochine vers 1906, don Collin de Plancy en 1928. Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Société de Géographie, SG WD-216*

To operate opium farms in Cochinchina and extract profits, Chinese merchants tapped into and depended on contingent inter-Asian networks of trade, productions and processing, and distributions that plugged Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn into a web of global narcotic trade stretching from British Singapore to Hong Kong. Ong Song Siang, writing about the state of the opium trade in Singapore, commented that opium farmers remained the wealthiest, most politically well-

<sup>25</sup> “Opium in the Orient. Report of the Philippine Commission.” *The North China Herald and Supreme Court & Consular Gazette* (1870-1941), April 21, 1905, p. 133.



connected, and unrivaled competitors in Southeast Asian colonies.<sup>26</sup> More specifically, it was diasporic Chinese merchants—those “Nanyang Mandarin capitalists”—that controlled the bids for opium revenue farms and maintained a close partnership with European colonists.<sup>27</sup> In southern Vietnam, two Chinese business magnates held a monopoly on the pre-*Régie* era of opium farming. Their different ventures and involvement with opium revealed two distinct modes of interactions with the French colonial state and the complex manners in which (overseas) Chinese capitalism, on the one hand, shaped the colonial economy and, on the other hand, integrated Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn into contingent networks of Chinese capitalism in Southeast Asia. As such, the presence of Straits Chinese entrepreneurs, whether Baba, Peranakan, or Cantonese in origins, in the south deserves further scrutiny in our examination of Franco-Chinese interactions.

Wang-Tai 王太 (or Vương Đại in Vietnamese), also known locally as the “opium king” of Indochina, was a Chinese trader of Cantonese origin who arrived at Chợ Lớn in 1862 prior to establishing a fluvial service company in Macau that successfully sealed a deal with the French government to import junks from Hong Kong to Sài Gòn. Upon his arrival in Chợ Lớn, Wang was already a self-made man, having made a career for himself from this Macau-based ship company and set up shop in Phnom Penh as part of an expansion of the Wang-Tai firm into Indochina.<sup>28</sup> Two crucial factors enabled Wang-Tai, also known as Zhang Peilin (Trương Á Lâm), to seize the opportunity to become one of the two largest Chinese opium revenue syndicates in the colony. First, the massive capital channeled from profits that the Wang-Tai firm made from auxiliary industries, most notably real estate and the rice trade (chapter 1) played a decisive role in the

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<sup>26</sup> Ong Siang Song, *One Hundred Years' History of the Chinese in Singapore* (Singapore ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1984).

<sup>27</sup> Michael R. Godley, *The Mandarin-Capitalists from Nanyang: Overseas Chinese Enterprise in the Modernisation of China 1893-1911* (Cambridge [England: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

<sup>28</sup> Nola Cooke, “King Norodom’s Revenue Farming System in Later-Nineteenth-Century Cambodia and His Chinese Revenue Farmers (1860-1891),” *Chinese Southern Diaspora Studies*, Volume 1: 30-55, p. 51.

consolidation of the firm's investment portfolio. By 1870, Zhang owned two major businesses, including several brick and rice export factories located on Quai Gaudot.<sup>29</sup> Revenues from his participation in the rice trade, sustained through his former Hong Kong links, and active investments in Chợ Lớn rice mills allowed him to be involved in the making of the colonial state's infrastructure in the form of supplying construction materials and land sales. Thus, Wang's contributions to Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn real estate scene, rivaled that of the contemporaneous tycoon Hui-Bon-Hua (colloquially "Chú Hỏa"), undoubtedly built his reputation for uncharted wealth, but also enforce the colonial trust in, if not dependency on, his connection and capital networks. French commentary remarked, often in bedazzlement, how "this dexterous Chinese could have constructed all buildings in the area of *Arroyo Chinois*, including a grand, castle-like structure known as the Wang-Tai mansion, which he rented out to the colonial government to operate many of its fundamental governing services such as a central police station and the naval and other civil-servant offices."<sup>30</sup> The French government then bought the mansion, after a period of negotiation, from the Wang-Tai firm for a high bid of 254,000 francs a few years later.<sup>31</sup> Relying on enormous fortunes made from these capitalist ventures and drawing on his prior experiences with the opium revenue farms in Cambodia, Wang-Tai, by 1881—the so-called peak period of drug processing and trade in Indochina—earned his role as "the state's primary sub-contractor" in charge of

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<sup>29</sup> See Wang-Tai entry in « Noms Raison Sociale de la Maison Commerce », *Annuaire de la Cochinchine Française*, Janvier 1, 1870, p. 139. Bibliothèque Nationale de France. Another source also indicated that his positive relationship to the French authority seem to have advanced significantly in 1891 when the Lieutenant-Governor of French Cochinchina approved his request to obtain an exclusive permit to operate a steamboat under the French flag called Tai-Sun-Ly. In the context of French protectionism, only a few privileged Chinese, perceived as essential by the French colonial state, could acquire such permits. See « Arrêté autorisant le sieur Wang-Tai à faire naviguer sous pavillon français sa chaloupe Tai-Sun-Ly, » *Bulletin officiel de l'Indochine française*, 10 mars 1891, p. 213, Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

<sup>30</sup> Anatole Petiton, *La Cochinchine française : la vie à Saïgon, notes de voyage* / par M. A. Petiton, (Lille, 1883), p. 11. Bibliothèque nationale de France, LK10-139.

<sup>31</sup> Xavier Gaultier de Claubry, *Un casse-cou : ou le budget de la Cochinchine en 1882*, (Impr. de J. Le Clere : Paris, 1882), pp. 32-33. Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

managing the opium production and distribution networks in Cochinchina.<sup>32</sup> More importantly, the French record also reveals that Wang's feat could not have been single-handedly achieved without the support of a close-knit inter-Asian business linkage, including his seemingly close relationship to the Chinese businessman Lư Chạp, who would later rise to the occasion as the front-man of Cambodia's opium farms, pawn shops, and gambling houses.<sup>33</sup> Marius Bernard's observations from his travelogue revealed that Wang's opium monopoly accrued million francs in profits, leaving the colonial state in a dire situation which partly necessitated its urgent reforms and that the decision to dispense with the Chinese-led farming system enabled the state opium monopoly to rake in "a respectable 8.6 million francs, thus making up for the budget loss".<sup>34</sup>

If Wang-Tai's involvement in the Cochinchina's opium farming demonstrates the inextricable linkage between Chinese diasporic capital and colonial capitalism, the case of our second protagonist here—the Fujian-Hokkien Chinese Ban-Hap—further reveals a remarkable level of co-dependency, from which the French attempted, with minor success, to disentangle in the 1900s. Ban-Hap, known also as Nhạn Vĩ Thiên or his Strait-Chinese alias Gan Wee Tin, in collaboration with the Baba Chinese "Tan brothers" syndicate—Tan Keng Sing, Tang Keng Leong,

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<sup>32</sup> Gerard Sages, "Scaling the Commanding Heights: The Colonial Conglomerates and the Changing Political Economy of French Indochina," *Modern Asian Studies* 49, no. 5 (September 2015): 1485–1525, p. 1495.

<sup>33</sup> Nguyễn Đức Hiệp, for example, found out that in 1879, Wang-Tai sent his son to Cambodia to become an apprentice after the Cantonese Lư Chạp, then residing in Cambodia. The move was likely a strategic one as Wang's son would soon become responsible for the establishment of a number of dominant pawn businesses in that part of the French colony all under the tutelage of the Wang-Tai firm. Nola Cooke further shows that King Norodom of Cambodia, on multiple occasions, had to concede to Lư Chạp's demands in the forms of state-authorized monopoly bids on fisheries, opium, and gambling (likely due to the pressure from the Wang Tai company given its enormous contribution to Cambodia's annual revenue). See Nguyễn Đức Hiệp, *Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn: Qua Những Tư Liệu Quý Trước 1945* [Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn Through Pre-1945 Valuable Documents], (TPHCM: Nhà Xuất Bản Văn Hóa Văn Nghệ, 2018), pp. 252-263; on the Lư Chạp-Wang-Tai connection in Cambodia's opium farming, see Nola Cooke, "King Norodom's Revenue Farming System in Later-Nineteenth-Century Cambodia and His Chinese Revenue Farmers (1860-1891)," pp. 52-54.

<sup>34</sup> Bernard, Docteur (de Cannes). Fonction indéterminée. *De Toulon au Tonkin (itinéraire d'un transport)... (Avril 1885.)*. (Laplace, Sancher : Paris, 1885), Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Département Philosophie, histoire, sciences de l'homme, 8-LK10-164 (BIS) pp. 290-291.

and Tan Keng Hoon—operated undoubtedly the largest and most important transregional opium farm networks that shouldered the French colonial budget. We may recall that at the height of the colonial rice trade, the Vạn Hòa company founded by this commercial magnet Ban-Hap, which received investments from Singapore, was responsible for a lion’s share of the rice-shipping and processing businesses in Chợ Lớn by the late nineteenth century (chapter 1). Much of the company’s success in relevant industries was largely owing to Ban-Hap’s early advantages in gaining the rights to run opium revenue farms against his competitors. On May 1, 1865, the news of such a successful opium farm sale braced the Singapore commercial press, reflecting the critical magnitude of this event, which announced that Ban-Hap won the bid to purchase this farm for a sum of 1,200,000 francs per annum.<sup>35</sup> His intimate relationships to the Tan brothers with potent connections to various business ventures in the Nanyang world certainly helped play no small role in amplifying the influential scope of the Cochinchina-based business. In 1890, when Tan Siu Eng of Batavia went to Sài Gòn on a Dutch mission to investigate the state of the Opium *régie*, he discovered a business enclave in Sài Gòn occupied by Baba Chinese merchants from Singapore and Malaya. This neighborhood located along the axes of *Rue de Fujian* and *Rue de Paris* was the earliest home to a community of Singapore-based merchants in Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn.<sup>36</sup> The two Tan brothers, especially Tan Keng Sing and Tan Keng Hoon, were documented to have been involved in Ban-Hap opium farm at associate levels and to collaborate closely in a significant victory in 1879 wherein this Sài Gòn-Singapore Straits Chinese alliance was able to profit from both French and British exclusive contracts.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> “Sài Gòn, extracted from the *Courier de Sài Gòn*, May 5, 1865,” *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 18 May 1865, NewspaperSG, NLB.

<sup>36</sup> Claudine Salmon, “De Batavia à Saïgon: Notes de voyage d’un marchand chinois,” *Archipel* 47 (1994): 155–84.

<sup>37</sup> Étienne Denis, *Bordeaux Et la Cochinchine Sous la Restauration Et Le Second Empire* (Delmas, 1965), p. 198.



**Figure 10: Maison Wang-Tai**

*Source: Souvenir de Cochinchine. Gsell, Emile (1838-1879). Photographe. Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Estampes et photographie, PETFOL-VH-282.*

However, the predominance of the Ban-Hap company and his business syndicates became alarming to the French colonial government, which was then seeking new ways to reprogram the colony's financial system and to address the "evil of Chinese monopoly." The colonial drive towards breaking up Chinese commercial domination not only in the opium revenue farms but also in a vast majority of essential industries—rice, pepper, and credits—thus had been simmering since the notorious bail-out that took place in 1874. The Ban-Hap opium farms' irresponsible spending behaviors and improvident management forced them into a state of near-bankruptcy. But the colonial state could no longer turn a blind eye to this urgent situation: the imminent failure of a

“too big to fail” enterprise was on the verge of endangering Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn’s firms as they trickled into insolvency. It finally resorted to saving Ban-Hap by extending the company’s debt repayment terms.<sup>38</sup> On May 4, 1881, the colonial state eventually made its verdict regarding the fate of Ban-Hap and his fortunes. The *Journal Officiel* announced officially that the opium farm, previously a joint-venture between the French colonial government and Ban-Hap, would cease to exist starting December 31 of the same year, spelling an end to the era of Chinese control of opium businesses. “From the morning of January 1, 1882,” this announcement stated, “opium will be sold on specified excise warehouses, in pots, closed and sealed with an official stamp with contents and quality guaranteed.”<sup>39</sup> From then on, only licensed shops and vendors designated by the state could engage in opium sales.

Without a doubt, Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn’s Chinese involvement in the opium trade placed the city at the center of opium production and revenue farming in the entirety of French Indochina. A French visitor shed crucial insights into how a typical Chinese opium factory in the city operated, providing some detailed descriptions as follows:

This factory is located on *rue* Paul Blanchy, formerly *rue* National, on a plot of one hectare, and is surrounded by high walls. It includes both the boiler room and the workshops, which are attended by a few European leaders and supervisors, under the orders of which a large number of Asian personnel are presented, many Chinese. Multiple and delicate operations are required in the manufacture of the *chandoo* [ready-to-smoke opium] from which as much morphine as possible is removed, supposedly to alleviate its ill effects on the health of consumers, although some native smokers claim that it is there intentionally to increase the acidity and the power of intoxication. The raw opium is thrown into vats of boiling water, to dissolve therein, with an infusion of tobacco or aromatic plants. It thus takes on the consistency of a very soft paste which is introduced into brass boxes and are then welded so as to withstand the pressure produced by fermentation in a closed vessel...An experienced worker must weigh 10,000 boxes per day. A large store house, valued at more than a million piastres, will protect the *chandoo* during fermentation. This is where the drug is to be shipped in all directions to fuel the passion of Indo-Chinese smokers.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Étienne Denis, *Bordeaux Et la Cochinchine Sous la Restauration Et Le Second Empire*, p. 202.

<sup>39</sup> “The Sài Gòn Opium Farm,” *Straits Times Overland Journal*, 28 July 1881, p. 2, NewspaperSG, NLB.

<sup>40</sup> « Bouillierie ou Manufacture d’opium, » in Missions Etrangères de Paris. Auteur du texte. *Annales des Missions Etrangères de Paris*, 1909, p. 13.

In addition to the presence of a historic Chinese merchant community with critical outside networks that sustained the circulations of opium, the prominence of Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn as a key area of the opium business followed a region-wide shift to urban-centered farming. Carl Trocki explained this phenomenon as the product of “a direct ratio between the modernization of the economy and the increase in opium smoking.”<sup>41</sup> As was the case in French Cochinchina, the formation of a class of “captive opium consumers”<sup>42</sup> could be traced in the increasing movements of migrant labors to the colonial port city that remained coterminous with the expansion of the rice trade and of urban infrastructures that generated a surge in demands for labor-intensive jobs in this region. Between 1873 and 1891, the number of Chinese who arrived to find opportunities in Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn rose dramatically from 9,801 to 11, 823 migrants. During this period, two particular spikes existed in 1879 (13, 704 migrants) and 1889 (13, 511 migrants) and without significant outliers, Cantonese and Teochew were two representative groups among the demographic of arrivers.<sup>43</sup> At the turn of the twentieth century, an estimated 90,000 opium smokers were recorded in Cochinchina. Among which, 20,000 (22%) were Chinese and 70,000 were non-Chinese (Vietnamese, Europeans, Indians, and others).<sup>44</sup> As such, Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn’s smokers accounted for 38 percent of the total colony-wide statistics, thus forming a major consumer market of the drug. Popular folklores, fictions, and poetic rhymes, such as this chapter’s epigraph, glorified the “nirvana” state of mind allowing coolies to escape from the harsh realities of poor labor conditions

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<sup>41</sup> Carl A. Trocki, “Opium and the Beginnings of Chinese Capitalism in Southeast Asia,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 33, no. 2 (2002): 297–314, p. 309.

<sup>42</sup> Carl Trocki, “Opium as a Commodity in the Chinese Nanyang Trade”, in *Chinese Circulations, Capital, Commodities, and Networks in Southeast Asia*, ed. Eric Tagliacozzo and Wen-Chin Chang, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 93.

<sup>43</sup> Official Figures for Arrivals and Departures (by Dialect Group if Available), 1876-1878, 1889, and 1891 in Nola Cooke, “The Heaven and Earth Society Upsurge in Early 1880s French Cochinchina,” *Chinese Southern Diaspora Studies*, Vol. 4: 42-73, p. 52.

<sup>44</sup> Statistics are cited from Chapter 24 of Hans Derks, *History of the Opium Problem: The Assault on the East, ca. 1600 - 1950*, Sinica Leidensia 105 (Leiden: Brill, 2012), pp. 435-436.

and geographical desolation.<sup>45</sup> Business owners, on the other hands, were among the most fervent proponent of opium uses among their labor force due to its double utilities as a stimulus drug for increased productivity and as a control mechanism to ensure labor retention and exploitation. One columnist in *L'Annam Tonkin*, for example, characterized the impacts of opium on the individual. “Opium,” he claimed, “exalts the individualism. And through its agency the man of action excites his ardor, the politician gives keenness to his will, the artist expands his dreams, and the thinker believes that he can attain the truth...It is at once today the stimulus of the educated, the amuser of the idle, the distraction of the toilers, the comfort of the wearied, the soother to sleep of pains and worries.” But furthermore, according to prevalent European views, “opium can open closed lips and make dumb conscience speak...the smoking room is an instrument of political investigation as much as it provides either an intellectual or simply a sensual distraction.”<sup>46</sup>

### ***The Régie de l’Opium: State Monopoly and French Relations with Chinese Merchants in the 1880s***

The movements toward the consolidation of Chinese diasporic capital, upon the bedrock of Chinese opium consortiums and French policies, against the wishes of European colonial interests resulted in a strained relationship between these two groups—a situation commonly shared in other Southeast Asian colonies including Java and Malaya.<sup>47</sup> On January 1, 1883, the first civil

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<sup>45</sup> Nguyễn Đức Hiệp, *Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn: Ký ức Đô Thị và Con Người* [Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn: Urban Memories and Its People], (TPHCM: Nhà Xuất Bản Văn Nghệ, 2016), pp. 312-313.

<sup>46</sup> “A Vindication of Opium,” *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 9 June 1908, p. 5. NewspaperSG, NLB.

<sup>47</sup> Some representative works include Derks, *History of the Opium Problem*; Trocki, *Opium, Empire, and the Global Political Economy*; Carl A. Trocki, *Opium and Empire: Chinese Society in Colonial Singapore, 1800-1910*, Asia, East by South (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1990); Timothy Brook and Bob Tadashi Wakabayashi, *Opium Regimes: China, Britain, and Japan, 1839-1952* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Steffen Rimner, *Opium’s Long Shadow: From Asian Revolt to Global Drug Control* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2018); James R Rush, *Opium to Java: Revenue Farming and Chinese Enterprise in Colonial Indonesia, 1860-1910* (Jakarta: Equinox Pub., 2007); George Bryan Souza, “Opium and



Governor-General of French Cochinchina, Le Myre De Vilers, abolished the system of Chinese opium farming throughout the colony and took in its own hand the import, manufacturing, and sales of this drug.<sup>48</sup> Indochina's decision, characterized derisively by nearby British authority as "an important yet precarious experiment" and as setting itself up for failure following what happened to revenue farms in Java (where the Chinese were skillful smugglers), was made in French colonists' full conviction that opium farms had created condition unamenable to French control of Chinese capital, leading to unlawful Chinese bidding behaviors and to the enabling of a suspicious syndicate seeking to undermine colonial regulations.<sup>49</sup> Article 47 and 48 of the ordinance made clear the purposes of the new system relating to opium as they laid out the "sole rights of the colonial state to import opium into Cochinchina" and a new legal designation that defined "illicit" or "fraudulent" opium ascribed to any sources of opium that came from unofficial channel other than the state. The regulations also sought to impose legal punishments—both imprisonment and fine—upon offenders and to create exceptions with opium designed for medical purposes. In 1899, Governor-General Paul Doumer officialized a general opium monopoly as a part of an empire-wide fiscal reconfiguration program, which brought to life a new era of governing complications that heralded the "unfortunate" ends of an otherwise ambitious and grand project.

The abrupt transition from lucrative opium farms administered by Chinese business consortiums to a centralized state monopoly (*Régie de l'Opium*) in 1883 did little to change the landscape of an existing Chinese-dominated colonial political economy. Rather than to directly

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the Company: Maritime Trade and Imperial Finances on Java, 1684-1796," *Modern Asian Studies* 43, no. 1 (2009): 113–33.

<sup>48</sup> Décret, *Journal Officiel de la Cochinchine Française*, 7 Novembre. Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

<sup>49</sup> "Opium in French Cochinchina," *The Straits Times Overland Journal*, 19 December 1881, p.2. NewspaperSG, NLB.

manage state deficits by controlling revenue flows, as Jacques Dumarest demonstrates, it served to largely fulfill a longstanding struggle facing the colonial state since 1861: to enervate Chinese monopolistic power in the opium trade and to reinforce colonial control of opium distributions, which, in an ironic manner, remained overwhelmingly in the hands of Chinese agents in both domestic circulations and overseas export.<sup>50</sup> A classic consequence of protectionism, French interventionist approach in the form of state-led monopoly got themselves in a volatile situation as Chinese opium contrabands and smuggling occurred at an increasing rates in response to the colonial policy.<sup>51</sup> This dire situation in the early years of the Opium *Régie* system implementation that posed an enormous governing challenge to the colonial state could be seen in abundant examples that surfaced in the French records.

In November 1890, for example, M. G. Guillot, the director of warehouse of indirect contributions and customs of Cochinchina, appealed to the director of *Régie* in Sài Gòn for going forward with an urgent request to install a monitoring station on the Vĩnh Tế canal to “effectively stop the inflow of smuggled opium from Cambodia into Cochinchina.” Through a report submitted to him recently describing in detail the operations of Chinese opium traffickers in the Tịnh Biên region (An Giang Province), Guillot drew attention to the porosity of the border here not only as one of the largest floating markets in this area, but also as a strategic region in equal distance to Hà Tiên and Châu Đốc with numerous built-in networks of roads, mountains, and waterways

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<sup>50</sup> Jacques Dumarest, *Các Ty Độc Quyền Thuốc Phiện và Muối ở Đông Dương* [Opium and Salt Monopoly Firms in Indochina], (Hà Nội : Nhà Xuất Bản Khoa Học Xã Hội, 2020). Trans by Nguyễn Thừa Hỷ from French original *Les Monopoles de L’Opium et du Sel en Indochine*, (Lyon : Bosc Frères M. & L. Biou, 1938), pp. 54-55.

<sup>51</sup> Gerard Sasges and Scott Cheshier, “Competing Legacies: Rupture and Continuity in Vietnamese Political Economy,” *South East Asia Research* 20, no. 1 (March 1, 2012): 5–33, p. 16.

connecting the province to Cambodia.<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, clandestine Chinese society members were well aware of the region's topographical advantages both in the availability of numerous escapeways and in the sources of opium produces, leading to an expansion of "illicit" activities which, according to M. Greterin, Director of Customs, "inflicted enormous harms on opium keepers near the frontier." French colonial investigations also indicated possible collusions between a large community of settled Chinese near the Cambodian-Vietnamese border, Chinese secret society, and provincial congregation leaders in the Transbassac when many Cambodian Chinese merchants were discovered to also hold Cochinchina's residence cards. The abuse of the residence card system (see chapter 3) led the French to tighten and restrict the movements of Cochinchina's Chinese through a formal process of declaration of intentions when they departed from the colony.

The difficulties with the French policing of the opium trade speak to a common endemic issue in colonial governance: uncontrolled flows of "uncertified" opium chests and their much lower sale prices in underground or black markets. In 1911, Hong Kong merchants expressed a worrisome view that "a significant fact in the export statistics is the increase in the number of chests of uncertified opium going to Bangkok and Sài Gòn...at any rate, it is evident that all the uncertified opium now being shipped to Singapore, Bangkok, and Sài Gòn is not meant for those places, as the quantity is far above the normal consumption."<sup>53</sup> By comparison, Eric Tagliacozzo estimates that by 1900, about 83 percent of opium coming into the Dutch East Indies was

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<sup>52</sup> « M. F. Guillot, Entrepouseur des Contributions Indirectes et Douanes de Cochinchine à Monsieur le Directeur des Douanes et Régie à Sài Gòn, » 18 novembre 1890, GOUCOCH B.8 N14478, *Dossier Relatif à L'Insertion de l'Avis d'Adjudication, Secours, Réclamation, Contrebande en Douanes et Régies Années 1886-1890*, TTLTQG-II, HCMC.

<sup>53</sup> "Opium Trade Crisis. Wholesale Smuggling of the Uncertified Article," 31 July 1911, *The Straits Times*, NewspaperSG, NLB.

“illegal.”<sup>54</sup> In Indochina, while not as widespread in number, it still accounted for some 25 percent of Indochina’s budget.<sup>55</sup> Some reports even estimated that about four-fifth of the drug consumed in Sài Gòn were supplied by smugglers.<sup>56</sup> Meanwhile in Siam, it was believed that “the annual quantities of illicit opium smuggled into Siam now far exceeded the sales of *régie* opium.” During the 1919-20 period, 1,335 cases of opium law violation were recorded, and this rose dramatically to 10,081 by 1936.<sup>57</sup> A commentator remarked that “the enormous quantities of contraband opium that comes over a border country of mountains and jungle constitutes the most serious problem of opium administration.” Alfred McCoy further stresses the gravity of the problem, highlighting how “with 50% of the region’s smokers and 70% of its dens, Bangkok and Sài Gòn were Southeast Asia’s premier opium markets, offering high profits which drew the caravans southward from the opium hills of Yunnan and Burma.”<sup>58</sup>

The Opium *Régie* had a deleterious effect not only on the French’s already-problematic economic structure of opium farming, but also on its relationship to wealthy Chinese merchants, which had gone sour in the aftermath of state-monopoly enforcement. First, the dispossession of Chinese capitalists from the former model of opium farm consortiums led to an imminent depletion of sources and issues of underproduction. Without Chinese diasporic networks, the French turned to the import of raw opium from well-known regions such as China and India. Unpredictable fluctuations in these markets especially in time of complex political transitions, however, as a British source reported, “will become a source of danger to the *Régie*.” In fact, On July 19, 1910,

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<sup>54</sup> Eric Tagliacozzo, *Secret Trades, Porous Borders, Smuggling and States Along a Southeast Asian Frontier, 1865-1915*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 188.

<sup>55</sup> Descours-Gatin, *Quand l’opium finançait la colonisation en Indochine*, p. 165.

<sup>56</sup> “Regie Opium at Sài Gòn,” *The Straits Times*, 15 November 1909, NewspaperSG, NLB.

<sup>57</sup> “Illicit Opium Dominates Siam Sales. Steady Increase in Offences,” *The Straits Times*, 20 December 1937, NewspaperSG, NLB.

<sup>58</sup> Alfred W. McCoy, “From Free Trade to Prohibition: A Critical History of the Modern Asian Opium Trade,” *Fordham Urban Law Journal*, Vol. 28, No. 1, 2000, p. 328.

China, where two-third of Indochinese opium supplies came from, ceased her supply chain, forcing the colony to turn to India whose opium supplies were also reduced as a result of the rising prohibitionist movement there.<sup>59</sup> Beyond the area of Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn, the French sought to expand its opium trade volume by piggybacking on its modernization project in Tonkin—the Yunnan-Hải Phòng railway—to allow a larger quantities of opium to reach further important cities of China’s coast, including Shanghai and Canton.<sup>60</sup> The inception of this rail line was indispensable to the French-controlled opium trade as it helped remove an immediate obstacle: opium transported by mules on the land route had to cross warlord-controlled territories in south China, making these paths perilous and unpredictable.<sup>61</sup>

To fulfill the hope of proclaimed efficiency as envisioned by those who invented its operation and invested resources in its creation in Indochina, the Opium *régie* nevertheless could not break completely with the prior system—now dismantled on paper—that supported it and had to continue to seek benefits from these former apparatuses. Here, the biggest irony of colonial governance began to manifest. While the state opium monopoly seized the rights to control drug sources, it struggled endlessly to procure, process, and distribute the finished products to smokers. The agents of the colonial state assumed the responsibilities without much prior practical knowledge, understandings of local communities, nor essential on-the-ground resources to support the extensive endeavors. The latter undoubtedly ensued a close collaboration with a critical network of warehouse managers, creditors and debtors, business retailers, and owners of smoking

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<sup>59</sup> “Hard Times Are in Store for the Opium *Régie*,” 19 July 1910, *The Straits Times*, NewspaperSG, NLB.

<sup>60</sup> On the construction of railways in colonial Vietnam as a trans-imperial project, see David W. del Testa, “‘Imperial Corridor’: Association, Transportation and Power in French Colonial Indochina 1,” *Science, Technology and Society* 4, no. 2 (September 1, 1999): 319–54.

<sup>61</sup> Philippe Le Failler, “Acteurs du Marché Legal et Agents Commerciaux du Négocio de l’Opium en Indochine, » in Virginie Chaillou-Atrous, Jean-François Klein and Antoine Resche, *Les Négociants Européens et le Monde : Histoire d’une Mise en Connexion*, (Rennes : Presse Université de Rennes, 2016), p. 117.

rooms in Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn and other major provincial cities. In virtually all cases, it was Chinese merchants and their intermediaries that took care of these complex processes. It was no surprise then that these same members of the colonial society were often those that showed their contempt for French regulations and revolted against the colonial law through drug-trafficking. In addition to problems with distributions that undermined the *régie*'s effectiveness, opium licenses and credits, too, became a thorn in the eyes of French regulators. In its conceptualization, the French praised the *régie* for its innovative licensing system that would give the colonial state a significant leverage against Chinese capitalist as it, according to Philippe Le Failler, controlled the number of opium sales as well as whom could engage in these transactions.<sup>62</sup> However, the geography of smokers and networks of debtors, which were predominantly Chinese, shaped the prices and demands of this consumer market, thus limiting the administrators' choices within their own system. Pannier J. commented that "even in some of the most miserable hamlets in the most remote and rural areas of Cochinchina, ones will run into an opium *régie*."<sup>63</sup> The French tried hard to counteract their overreliance on Chinese capitals and to reorient the system in their favor by searching for independent contractors. They attempted this by publicizing the number of available licenses, their conditions and requirements, and discounts as governmental incentives in *Quốc Ngữ* Press and posters. Regardless, Chinese merchants continued to seize the upper hands in the "opium game" by mastering the rules of the market and profiting from the flow of "unofficial" opium, which were often sold at half the official retail prices set by the colonial government.

Second, French adverse colonial policies targeting the opium trade as one of the most critical sources of income that shaped Chinese capitalism in Indochina had rendered Sino-French

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<sup>62</sup> Philippe Le Failler, *Monopole et Prohibition de l'opium En Indochine: Le Pilon Des Chimères*, Collection Recherches Asiatiques (Paris: Harmattan, 2001).

<sup>63</sup> Pannier J., « La Lutte Contre l'Opium » in *La Revue du Christianisme Social, Recueil Mensuel*, (Paris : Roger, 1911), p. 21.

relationship highly contentious at the turn of the twentieth century. In addition to a growing colonial distrust in rice merchants and a reconsideration of the place of Chinese intermediaries in the colonial economy, the French centralization effort to take control of opium revenues against Chinese economic interests led to resistance and social disorders. To be sure, French attitudes towards opium as a Chinese practice had never been entirely positive and rather racialized. Contemporaneous French commentators, for example, often sought to actively link Chinese “ruthlessness” and commercial competence to their abuses of opium as both a recreational and curing drug. Georges Thibout, in one instance, explained the influences of *chandoo* (processed opium) on the individual as a powerful psychological boost—a sort of memory-strengthening pills conducive to the stimulation of brain cells that energized one’s audacity—by citing an example of a Long-Xuyen administrator who consumed it on a daily basis. “The Chinese, especially those wealthy ones,” Thibout remarks, “go so far as to put the heads of their industrial and commercial businesses on moderate opium pills, which gave them a much-needed excitement and an extraordinary boom in imagination, allowing them to conceive the most unimaginable plans and to compete in the most strategic manner with rivals.” In this daring state of mind, “the boldness of the projects they [Chinese businessmen] conceived in clouds of smoke will not be stopped by any obstacles nor any consideration of consciences and ethics.”<sup>64</sup> Chinese consumption of opium, although a pathology and stereotype, was perceived to be an essentially positive trait in the logics of colonial capitalism. However, this line of justification shifted by the late nineteenth century when Chinese links to secret societies in the colony, which involved not only lower-class opium smokers but also reputable merchants, complicated the colonial situation—an important story in the history of ethnic interactions in Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn that we will turn to in the section that follows.

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<sup>64</sup> Georges Thibout, *La Question de l’Opium a l’Epoque Contemporaine*, (Paris : G. Steinheil Editeur, 1912), pp. 81-82.

## **The Secret Society Conundrum: Tiandihui, Chinese Gamblers, and the Contradictions of Colonial Policing**

### ***Secret Societies in New Forms: Chinese Cercles and the Control of Gambling***

On October 25, 1898, a secret society riot broke out at night in Chợ Lớn. The French colonial police made a surprise raid—one among many of that year—on a Chinese meeting, suspected to be a part of the Triad Organization ceremony. As the police broke inside the premises, they caught 350 Chinese listening intently to a speech, who then quickly resisted the police force and tried to escape from the premise. Two hours later, the police captured 74 Chinese and put all of them into confinement in preparation for further expulsion to the *Poulo Condore*—a penal island off the southernmost coast of Cochinchina. The event made the French authority anxious as, according to the *Courrier de Sài Gòn*, secret society placards had been seen all over the city. Upon closer scrutiny, the police found these posters to be either provoking anti-Qing sentiments, calling for the overthrow of the imperial government there, or criticizing the French government for introducing the opium monopoly. Many pictorial materials depicted the French as “devils from the West,” thus leading the authority to frantically seize in large quantities suspicious Chinese emblems all over Chợ Lớn. It was also reported that a part of Chợ Lớn was burnt down, likely the work of secret society in revenge of the French crackdown.<sup>65</sup> Continual raids on other shady premises in subsequent years further convinced French colonists that leading members of these secret organization had been men with great public influences, who could command an army of complicit Chinese to engage in the “unlawful practices of robbery and extortion” with impunity for this long.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> “Secret Society at Sài Gòn. Riot and Incendiarism.” *The Straits Times*, 25 October 1898, p.3. NewspaperSG, NLB.

<sup>66</sup> “Secret Societies in Sài Gòn.” *The Straits Times*, 18 October 1907. NewspaperSG, NLB.



On other occasion, a British observer responded to the editor of the newspapers *Daily Times* in Singapore, providing some descriptions of Sài Gòn's secret societies:

The exceptional trade of Sài Gòn with the province of Canton, has nevertheless poured into the colony an immense set of scoundrels but little known in the Straits. Most of them belong to the Ghee Hin [A well-known faction of Chinese secret societies] and their professions are—pirates, smugglers and gamblers, under the cover of firemen, blacksmiths, carpenters, stevedores, and boys. The Chew-chew [Teochew] come next in the importance of their hoeys [hui], and in the early period of the colony, their chiefs sometime joined the rebels. Many of the Tokein boatmen and coolies belong to the Toh-Poh-Kon. But no street disturbance has been witnessed for fifteen years, because the people have the conviction that they should be, if necessary, fired at after short notice.<sup>67</sup>

This surge in what the French then characterized as the “massive import of unruly people” occurred in the dual context of late-nineteenth century colonial governance in port city to cope with unexpected crises. By 1895, the southern Chinese port city of Canton, also then a British foreign settlement in that part of China, was hit by an epidemic, which prompted a sudden rise in outmigration.<sup>68</sup> Around the same period, the French colonial government decided to lift the temporary ban on Chinese migration from China to resolve the labor crisis as a result of a few prior years of stringent immigration policies (see chapter 3). The Governor-General of Cochinchina began to express his concerns about “the skyrocketing frequency of reported armed robberies and piracies in the waterways of the Transbassac—a popular trade route utilized by the government and Chinese merchants in Chợ Lớn to reach the trans-regional markets.”<sup>69</sup> It was perhaps no coincidence that one of the most scandalous seizure of a prominent steamship owned by a wealthy Chinese merchant, the *Pelican*, by a gang of Chinese pirates in the perilous water of Mỹ Tho and Vĩnh Long grabbed public attention just a few years earlier not only for the level of

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<sup>67</sup> “Chinese Secret Societies. *To the Editor of the Daily Times.*” *Straits Times Overland Journal*, 14 December 1876, p. 10. NewspaperSG, NLB.

<sup>68</sup> Carol Benedict, “Bubonic Plague in Nineteenth-Century China,” *Modern China* 14, no. 2 (1988): 107–55, p. 140.

<sup>69</sup> Thomas Engelbert, “‘Go West’ in Cochinchina. Chinese and Vietnamese Illicit Activities in the Transbassac (c. 1860-1920s),” *Chinese Southern Diaspora Studies*, Vol. 1: 56-82, pp. 70-71.

abject violence they inflicted on the boat crew but also for the seemingly organized nature of their flawless executions, which led to suspicion of collusion within the authority ranks. It was further reported that despite the colonial government's immediate dispatch of two major gunboats to quell the riot, the pirates, before successfully escaping from the carnage, "plundered the vessel and scuttled her at the mouth of the Mỹ Tho river," taking away "25,000 worth of Chinese silver and gold leaf."<sup>70</sup>

In the aftermath of the state-sanctioned opium monopoly in the 1880s, the opium revenue farm businesses became an instant site of endless political struggle and social upheavals, especially in areas beyond Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn where "illicit" networks of opium trade and processing with ties to secret societies had formed a rather lucrative "back economy" in southern Vietnam. One of the most notorious Chinese-led organizations that made a name for itself among circles of European and Vietnamese politicians in the colony was no doubt the Tiandihui 天地會 (Heaven and Earth Society), which, in the words of the southern historian Sơn Nam, "represented one of the most critical anti-colonial challenges, emblematic of the unique Mekong Delta culture of resistance, in the first half of twentieth-century Vietnam."<sup>71</sup> As a matter of fact, from 1880 to 1881, this Chinese underground organization was involved in a ruthless armed conflict with the colonial state in the province of Sóc Trăng where local reports indicated heavy uses of batons, knives, and even revolvers as well as serious instances of interracial solidarity including Chinese recruitments of Khmer, Cambodian, and Vietnamese villages to join force in the anti-government cause. The seriousness of the situation alarmed the central government in Sài Gòn, causing Le Myre De Vilers to enforce a sanction against the Teochew congregation of Sóc Trăng and, after taking an

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<sup>70</sup> "Thursday, 13 April," *Straits Times Overland Journal*, 20 April 1876, p. 8. NewspaperSG, NLB.

<sup>71</sup> Sơn Nam, *Phong Trào Duy Tân ở Bắc, Trung, Nam. Miền Nam Đầu Thế Kỷ XX—Thiên Địa Hội và Cuộc Minh Tân* [Anticolonial Resistance in North, Central, and South Vietnam. Southern Vietnam at the Turn of the Twentieth Century and Reform] (Nhà Xuất Bản Trẻ: HCMC, 2018), p. 82.

assessment fieldtrip to the area, to decide that drastic measures including confiscation of weapons, imprisonment, and expulsion had to be expedited.<sup>72</sup> Nola Cooke, unearthing new materials from the administrative archives in Sài Gòn and Cambodia, demonstrates that this series of Chinese riots, orchestrated by the Heaven and Earth Society, was primarily driven by the French decision to let the Chinese monopoly of the opium revenue farm disintegrate and to be replaced by a state monopoly (the *régie*). This new colonial regulations had essentially deprived major Chinese shareholders—coincidentally Hokkien and Cantonese investors—of their most profitable source of income, which instigated strong anti-colonial sentiments and resistance.<sup>73</sup>

By the late nineteenth century, in addition to the opium trade and their secret society links, the French struggled to control a new form of “special social club” for Chinese migrants in Cochinchina, called Chinese *cercles* [meaning association in French]. Shared dialects and origins were not the only reasons that justified the existence of different *cercles*; rather it was the distinctive recreational and commercial interests within each faction of the same congregation that distinguished these organizations from their larger umbrella system. In other words, *cercles* existed as subdivisions of the congregational system.<sup>74</sup> Membership to one of these clubs was of particular interest to wealthy Chinese merchants, which provided a distinctly exclusive space for people who shared the same dialects and a safe haven that attracted businessmen to come and organize their commerce and other businesses in a secretive manner. Travelogues from early Chinese travelers to Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn illustrated the popularity of *cercles* among the migrant population. Claudine Salmon, drawing on insights from a Batavian Chinese who made a visit to the city, reveals that at

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<sup>72</sup> « Sociétés Secrètes, Expulsions de Chinois 1882-1906, » GOUCOCH N4836 F.73, *Dossier Relatif aux Expulsions des Chinois et des Asiatiques Etrangers de la Colonie*, Années 1881-1916. TTLTQG-II, HCMC.

<sup>73</sup> Nola Cooke, “The Heaven and Earth Society Upsurge in Early 1880s French Cochinchina,” *Chinese Southern Diaspora Studies*, Vol. 4: 42-73, p. 43.

<sup>74</sup> Tracy C. Barrett, *The Chinese Diaspora in Southeast Asia: The Overseas Chinese in Indo-China*, Library of China Studies (London: Tauris, 2012), p. 199.

least two social clubs of similar nature existed in Chợ Lớn starting in the 1870s. Both of these clubs, established and run by Chinese from Singapore, occupied major commercial areas within the city and blended in with other dialect-based *cercles* rooted in Chợ Lớn (such as the Fujianese *cercles* headed by Ban-Hap).<sup>75</sup> In a letter addressing the governor general in 1887, a Chinese businessman, aware of the French reservation about affirming the legal standing of Chinese *cercles*, appealed to the colonial administration for permission to establish more institutions of the same kind, arguing that “*cercles* are vital to the normative functioning of a free market where business ideas are shared and openly discussed and where deals are efficiently made among us commercialists.”<sup>76</sup>

Evidence from the colonial archive pointed at the many possibility that Chinese *cercles*, on many occasions, functioned as the front cover for Chinese gambling activities in Chợ Lớn where, as previously in explained in this chapter, a thriving opium consumer market already existed with close links to the operation of secret societies in the city interior and beyond. Let’s come back to the Fujian Chinese Ban-Hap for a moment. We now know that Ban-Hap, supported by the colonial government and an inter-Asian networks of economic contingents, operated one of the most successful and extensive opium revenue businesses in French Cochinchina. This enabled him, similar to the cases of other Chinese commercial luminaries in Southeast Asia around this time, to capture a large share of the market in other industries (such as in rice export) and make auxiliary investments. While receiving a bail-out and other tax privileges from the colonial state, Ban-Hap’s relationship to the new colonial fiscal regime seemed to take a dive by 1893 when the French authority embarked on a relentless imperative to persecute tax-dodgers and illicit businesses—the

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<sup>75</sup> Claudine Salmon and Tạ Trọng Hiệp, “Wang Annan Riji: A Hokkien Literatus Visits Sài Gòn (1890),” *Chinese Southern Diaspora Studies*, Vol. 4: 74-88, 2010, p. 80.

<sup>76</sup> Letter from a Chinese businessman to the Governor-General of Cochinchina, 7 June 1887. GOUCOCH L.0 N11648. TTLTQG-II, HCMC.

same factor that motivated its innovation of the immigration capitation tax system. According to the legal paperwork filed by the judicial branch of the tax department, Ban-Hap, as the president of the Fujian (Phúc Kiến) *cercles* in Chợ Lớn, was indicted on a charge of illegally operating a gambling house—or casino—that freely admitted unauthorized elements. This report indicated that a surprised police raid at the premise captured twenty-one Chinese of various occupations, ranging from coolies, boatmen, and craftsmen. Many of whom did not appear on the *cercle* member lists—preapproved by the colonial government upon its agreement to establish said organization—and therefore deemed inadmissible by the authority. French investigation revealed that Ban-Hap was the shareholders of this *cercle* among other prominent merchants, and that due to his role as an accomplice in the gambling house, he would be fined and persecuted under the application of the new penal code.<sup>77</sup>

### ***Taming the “Beast”: Gambling as a Chinese Vice and Obstacles to Colonial Regulations***

Despite repeated crackdown attempts, the colonial records also reveal two dimensions of the Chinese merchant-French authority relationships, particularly in the realm of policing gambling businesses. This, I argue, stood in stark contrast with the situation of the opium revenue farms where the colonial state, by the time of the establishment of a new fiscal regime, had decided that a state-led monopoly would best benefit the struggle against a volatile Chinese-dominated political economy. In short, the short-lived experiments with Chinese opium revenue farms, if anything, exposed French colonists to their own limitations in running the colonial economy as they grafted on the framework of Chinese diasporic capital. In the first dimension of this relationship, on the one hand, as the case of gambling shall demonstrate, French reactions were not as clear-cut and

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<sup>77</sup> *Journal judiciaire de l'Indochine française*, (Sài Gòn, puis : Hà Nội puis : Sài Gòn, 1894), pp. 197-198. Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Département Droit, économie, politique, 8-F-9418.

decisive, which reflected the urban nature of gambling house clusters and their complex political entanglement between Chinese owners and colonial law enforcement, including the police and municipal administrators. On the other hand, the colonial obsession with shaping law-abiding citizens and applying draconian measures to transgressors justified the strengthening of its disciplinary apparatuses as well as the increasing frequency of raids, be they staged or legitimate.<sup>78</sup>

In the second dimension, police surveillance reports offered a glance at inventive Chinese approaches to dealing with colonial ambiguous policing, which, far from the French expectation to curb the growth of Chinese gambling establishments in Chợ Lớn, ironically strengthened their longevity and initiated a hostile relationship with the native population, especially among Vietnamese nationalists. In post-revolutionary Vietnam, Kevin Li shows that gambling remained among one of the most popular recreational activities and lucrative businesses that sustained the operations of major crime syndicates in south Vietnam, such as the Bình Xuyên commandeered by its notorious leader Bảy Viễn.<sup>79</sup>

Given the contested nature of Chinese gambling practices in Cochinchina both as a source of foreign vice to be tamed and as a potentially profitable businesses to be regulated, French officials maintained an openly tolerant attitudes towards Chinese *cercles* while conducting frequent raids to keep a random check on those “foreign Asiatics.” On August 4, 1880, the police commissioner of Chợ Lớn reported to the president of municipality on one such raid carried out

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<sup>78</sup> For example, a significant body of scholarship in colonial history shows the dialogical processes in which colonial violence and punishment often closely accompanied the evolving nature of crimes, thus propelling important inventions in disciplinary techniques and legalities. See Vicente L. Rafael and Rudolf Mrázek, eds., *Figures of Criminality in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Colonial Vietnam*, Studies on Southeast Asia, no. 25 (Ithaca, N.Y: Southeast Asia Program Publications, Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 1999); Jonathan Saha, “Colonization, Criminalization and Complicity: Policing Gambling in Burma c 1880–1920,” *South East Asia Research* 21, no. 4 (2013): 655–72; Elizabeth Kolsky, *Colonial Justice in British India, White Violence and the Rule of Law*, Cambridge Studies in Indian History and Society 17 (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

<sup>79</sup> Kevin Li, “Partisan to Sovereign: The Making of the Bình Xuyên in Southern Vietnam, 1945–1948,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 11, no. 3/4 (2016): 140–87, pp.156-157.

by a secret agent. At 9 o'clock in the evening, when this agent passed through Rue de Paris, he noticed a sight of unusual activity: a large number of Chinese coming in and out of the house occupied by the Fujian *cercle*. As he walked by the premise for a cursory check, the main hall remained empty while a mysterious staircase led to a large door, behind which lay a gambling room—now disguised as a commercial meeting room—and a huge table. As soon as a Chinese guard at the door spotted his presence, he alarmed his “teammates” of the situation and, as the agent exclaimed, “the door that I saw was immediately closed behind me and there were barricades coming down from all sides preventing anyone from entering this room.” For reasons unbeknownst to him, all the Chinese and clients he saw vanished without a trace. Surprisingly, this agent eventually summoned the president of this *cercle*, a certain Tạ Thanh Nguồn, only to give him a warning of a potential infringement of article 11 of the regulation of Chinese *cercles* and gambling.<sup>80</sup> A subsequent exchange between the Director of the Interior and the Governor-General of Cochinchina further sheds some further insights into why French police agents tended to surveil the premises of Chinese *cercles* for potential activities that violated its regulations, but rarely made rampant arrests. On November 22, 1879, the Teochew *cercle* was shut down unexpectedly and had all of its properties—including its gambling revenues of about 53,350 francs—confiscated by the French authority. The colonial government cited this decision on the ground of this establishment’s engaging in unlawful business behaviors by admitting “foreign persons [Vietnamese and Europeans] and tolerating games that served as the pretext for a scandalous brawl.”<sup>81</sup> This inconsistent application of the colonial legal codes revealed an important fact about the French treatment of Chinese gambling at the turn of the twentieth century. As Erica J. Peters sums this up

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<sup>80</sup> « Chợ Lớn, Monsieur le Président de la Municipalité, » 4 August 1880, GOUCOCH D.623 N3596. TTLTQG-II, HCMC.

<sup>81</sup> « Rapport Au Gouverneur, » Sài Gòn, 22 November 1879, GOUCOCH D.623 N3596. TTLTQG-II, HCMC.

quite effectively, “the French justified their approach by differentiating between gambling by Chinese elites, which could be tolerated safely, and Vietnamese gambling, which would bring on harsh penalties.” French colonial segregationist tendency when it came to its regulation of Chinese gambling reflected its effort to reconcile an inherently contradictory racialized view of Vietnamese native versus Chinese migrants as “foreign Asians.” As for the former, the colonial state was burdened by its own claims to the civilizing mission: to uphold its promise to keep the native afar from “Chinese contaminations” and subversive elements. For the latter, French dominant attitude, especially in light of the opium trade regulation, toward Chinese migrants had been that of a formidable threats to colonial rule. As George Durrell elaborated, the thought of the gambling room as a space of limitless inter-racial intermingling and socialization terrified French colonists and that this should be significant enough to justify “the absolute prohibition of the presence of natives in Chinese *cercles*.”<sup>82</sup>

Police corruption and Chinese merchants’ flexible cooptation of the situation proved to be two most serious impediments to colonial control of gambling and associated vices, including prostitution and the shadowy operations of secret societies. If *cercles* masked as commercial organizations used to be a popular method of disguising gambling houses, with continual colonial raids on these premises, Chinese business owners shifted to adorning these premises as restaurant or hotel businesses. This movement, in reaction to the colonial law, could be seen in a police report of an incident that took place on July 1, 1885 when president of the Teochew *cercles*, Huỳnh Tiến Chi, ran into a feud with the Chợ Lớn’s administrator as he refused to demolish the walls that partitioned many rooms in his building into suspicious spaces. As it turned out, a surveillance officer noticed about 20 Chinese arriving by the tramway and entering the *cercles* of the Hakka

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<sup>82</sup> Georges Durrell, “le Jeu en Cochinchine [Gambling in Cochinchina], » *Bulletin de la Société des études indochinoises de Saïgon Année 1901* 1er Semestre, pp. 10-11. Bibliothèque Nationale de France.



and Teochew merchants early in the morning on Rue des Marins. With reinforcement, the police followed these so-called Chinese to the bottom of the outbuildings and to the ground floors, but as they arrived in the last room on the left, they were faced by a Chinese who stood sentinel and immediately extinguished the lantern hanging against the wall. In the darkness, they found a shutter door close by, which gave access to a game room. This door was immediately barricaded inside and then came the sound of hurried footsteps and the stirring of money. Not giving up, the police made another raid at three o'clock in the morning the next day. This time, they were flabbergasted by the destruction of evidence: the said *cercle* room, where an estimate of 20 foreign Chinese from Singapore attended yesterday, was now cut in half. A new wall had been erected to separate a previously larger space into a reception room.<sup>83</sup> In other instances, links to the Tiandihui (Heaven and Earth Society) could be found upon arrests of not only Chinese gamblers but also merchants who owned some of these premises. Such was the case of an 1894 mass arrest wherein eight Chinese of the Cantonese congregation were caught disguising their *cercle* as a “commercial organization” to conduct illicit businesses. The French police was able to locate amulets, insignias, and books of rules that pointed at their affiliations as members of the secret society. Without much recourse, all eight members of the *cercles* were charged under colonial law and held in Sài Gòn’s central prison before being officially expelled from the colony. While evidence of collusion was not definite and might seem circumstantial, the continuing prevalence of gambling despite increasing colonial policing pervaded the colonial records. We could thus speculate that the

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<sup>83</sup> « Commissariat de Police de Chợ Lớn. Procès-Verbal : Infraction a l’Article de l’arrêté du 27 Février 1882 sur les Cercles Chinois, » 1 July 1885, GOUCOCH D.623 N3599. Other similar instances of infractions could also be located in this dossier. See GOUCOCH D.623 N35599, *Dossier Relatif à la Demande D’Ouverture et Organisation du Cercles des Congrégations de Triều Châu et D’Akas, Années 1878-1885*. TTLTQG-II, HCMC.

ineptitude of the police had forestalled large-scale efforts to put Chinese gambling houses in check—a situation only worsened by the hyper-activities of Chinese secret societies.<sup>84</sup>

Perhaps, there is no better example of the colonial failure to prosecute Chinese gambling establishments and “criminal conducts” than the case of Chợ Lớn’s gambling king, Sáu Ngọ, a Minh Hương Chinese who controlled a number of major Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn’s casinos in the 1920s. According to a court proceeding, Sáu Ngọ, a naturalized French citizen also named Paul Daron, was born on August 29, 1883 in the ward of An Lợi. Adopted by the Parisian artist Charles Daron, Paul Daron had long cultivated a special relationship with French colonists. At a young age, he was hired by the police commission of Chợ Lớn to serve as an *indicateur* whose main job was to become the police’s local “watchdog” and pry on neighborhoods for subversive behaviors.<sup>85</sup> He began to gain exclusive trust from the authority for his involvement in the French investigation of the Barbier street murder—one of the most scandalous event of that year—in which he denounced an Annamese leader for his role in the assassination plot.<sup>86</sup> With money in his hand and connections to local Chinese and French administrators alike, Paul Daron was first a frequent client at Chinese gambling *cercles* and then became a notorious investor himself, who gained the reputation among Chinese business circles as “the godsend protective shield for the most passionate gamblers in Cochinchina.”<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> «Le Commissaire de Police à Monsieur le Commissaire Central de Police à Sài Gòn, » Chợ Lớn, 15 December 1894, GOUCOCH D.626 N187 *Dossier Relatif à l’Internement des Condamnes Chinois Convaincus de Faire Partie d’une Société Secrète Thiên Địa Hội a Pulo-Condore Année 1895*. For the official indictment of the eight secret society members, including Lưu Phi, Liêu-Như, Giang-Đan, Đàm-Yên, Huỳnh-Sổ, Huỳnh-Phan, Tạ-Kinh, and Giang-Hoa, see « Monsieur Belland, Commissaire Central à Monsieur le lieutenant-Gouverneur de la Cochinchine, » Sài Gòn, 17 December 1894. GOUCOCH D.626 N187. TTLTQG-II, HCMC.

<sup>85</sup> “Lưới Trời Khó Tránh. Paul Daron Đã Bị Xử Tại Toàn Án Trừng Trị Sài Gòn [Crime Does Not Pay. Paul Daron Prosecuted at the Sài Gòn’s Justice Court],” *Hà Thành Ngọ Báo*, No. 663, 18 November 1929. TVQGVN Newspapers Collection.

<sup>86</sup> On the Barbier street murder in Sài Gòn, see Hue-Tam Ho Tai, *Passion, Betrayal, and Revolution in Colonial Sài Gòn the Memoirs of Bao Luong* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).

<sup>87</sup> “Paul Daron là ‘Thần Hộ Mệnh’ của Các Con Bạc [Paul Daron is the Protective God for Gamblers],” *Hà Thành Ngọ Báo*, No. 662, 17 October 1929. TVQGVN Newspapers Collection.

Given Sáu Ngọ's higher status and internal connections in the French colonist circles, what was the last straw that broke between his business and the French government, leading to his second arrest in 1929? As it turned out, the magnitude of blatant organized gambling ignoring colonial regulations and the continually exceptional status of Sáu Ngọ's *cercles* had angered an opposing faction of the colonial police force. As a result, on October 8, 1929, a surveillance force led by the police commissioner M. Poillot made a raid on one of Daron's most popular casinos on 354 Rue De Marius only to encounter 27 Chinese engaging in gambling, opium smoking, and prostitution. Based on the court record publicized in Sài Gòn's newspapers, in the presence of an adjourning court packed with curious Chinese residents of Chợ Lớn, Sáu Ngọ repeatedly denied having any affiliations with said *cercle* and insisted on his innocence, claiming that the police were unfairly targeting his business and making baseless accusations.<sup>88</sup> Court interviews with witnesses and the 27 Chinese clients involved, presented by the prosecuting attorney M. Lafrique, revealed quite a different story. Two Chinese merchants, Lâm Tiên and A-Tông, confessed to the authority after days of interrogation, perhaps out of fear and intimidation, their positions as shareholders in Sáu Ngọ's gambling houses, which by 1931, had amounted to about dozens in number.<sup>89</sup> Other witnesses, including a security guard, a craftsman, and a taxi driver, all came forward to certify that they did assist the Sáu Ngọ's establishment in procuring and delivering gambling furniture to the *cercle* in question. Unprepared to respond to the evidence, Paul Daron's lawyer resorted to appealing to the empathy of the judges, arguing against the authority's criminalization of gambling as a senseless and illogical legal precedent because "the state, too, had been benefitting from opium

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<sup>88</sup> "Phiên Tòa, [A Court Case]," *Hà Thành Ngọ Báo*, No. 663, 18 November 1929. TVQGVN Newspapers Collection.

<sup>89</sup> The French newspapers *Les Annales Coloniales* was intrigued by Sáu Ngọ's situation in Cochinchina, asking how such a person of notoriety could continue establish this many gambling *cercles* with impunity. See « Contre les Jeux, » *Les Annales Coloniales: Organe de la « France Coloniale Moderne »*, 17 September 1931, p.3. Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

and gambling taxes...there was absolutely no necessity to indict Mr. Daron on a charge which he only committed as a purely recreational act—something many others in Chợ Lớn also pursued.”<sup>90</sup> M. Loye and Espinet, two of Sáu Ngọ’s attorneys, took the opportunity to divert the conversation with a counterclaim that Sáu Ngọ might have been a victim himself of defamation because “in the outrageous lack of evidence and those that exist only constituted hearsays, Mr. Sáu Ngọ was certainly framed in an unfair competition.”<sup>91</sup>

The mentions of the 1895 *cercle* laws regarding the colonial regulation of gambling and Sáu Ngọ attorneys’ argument in front of the colonial court that he was only acting in accordance with “normative” state behaviors revealed an intriguing tension in the relationship between colonial policing and Chinese gambling at this juncture. On the one hand, it was clear that Sáu Ngọ could be easily prosecuted by the state for operating what could be considered an “illegal” shadowy business, formally terminated by colonial law in 1895 albeit on paper rather than in practice. On the other hand, the colonial state had always maintained an ambiguous attitude towards regulations, not to mention functioning as the direct supporter and benefactor of a Chinese back economy. The evolving instances in this trial thus revealed that the core issue here was not one of “which constituted illegality,” but rather “who and why.” A memo from the plaintiff’s lawyer, M. Lafrique, insisting on the indictment of Paul Daron shed some light on this latter question:

We now have in hand a wide range of evidence leveraged against our defendant and his criminal records further reinforce my belief that no more benevolence from the state should be granted. His past employment with the colonial government, given all contexts, only exposes his machination to infiltrate our ranks for his own benefits. Most importantly, the colonial government should note that we are under the duress of practicing what we preach, that nobody is above the law under our rule. In charging Sáu Ngọ with criminal misconducts, we are

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<sup>90</sup> “Lưới Trời Khó Tránh. Paul Daron Đã Bị Xử Tại Toàn Án Trưng Trị Sài Gòn (Phần Tiếp Theo) [Crime Does Not Pay. Paul Daron Prosecuted at the Sài Gòn’s Justice Court, (Continued)],” *Hà Thành Ngọ Báo*, No. 663, 19 November 1929. TVQGVN Newspapers Collection.

<sup>91</sup> “Lưới Trời Khó Tránh. Paul Daron Đã Bị Xử Tại Toàn Án Trưng Trị Sài Gòn (Phần Tiếp Theo) [Crime Does Not Pay. Paul Daron Prosecuted at the Sài Gòn’s Justice Court, (Continued)],” *Hà Thành Ngọ Báo*, No. 663, 19 November 1929. TVQGVN Newspapers Collection.

showing the people of Chợ Lớn—especially those Chinese migrants [Khách Trú]—that he was not omnipotent in light of our protection.<sup>92</sup>

In short, whether Sáu Ngọ was framed by an internal agent or other opposing parties did not matter anymore. The fact that he was brought to trial by a French police agent and then got involved in a high-profile court case of enormous public interests forced the French authority to make a definite choice and confront its own ambiguity as it faced public pressure. This could be seen in how Vietnamese commentators responded to the rampant presence of Chinese secret societies with utmost contempt and concerns about their uncurbed power over every aspect of the urban life. In a contentious column, a Vietnamese journalist raised a question: “who let these scoundrels roam free?” and described Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn as another “hell on earth”:

God blesses us! If the government continue to let these outlaws off the leash, giving them the unlimited freedom to do what they want and go where they wish, they will ruin our young generation, our families, our health, and our culture. They smoked opium and imbibed alcohol without worries, and then gambled day and night. Supported by their gang comrades, they will spell the end to our civilization, bury it deep down till no essence of our nation and our identity are found anymore.

The government had acknowledged their responsibility for educating and enlightening the native. Why do you allow secret societies to thrive and what can you do to protect us from these “unbridled” Chinese?<sup>93</sup>

Sáu Ngọ might have been an unfortunate pawn in a brewing internal struggle, be it within the ranks of the colonial police force or other Chinese businessmen who sought to compete against his dominance. But the colonial state’s decision to hand him a sentence—a five-month imprisonment and 1000 francs—showed its willingness to maintain the legitimacy of its rule as well as its effort to navigate a deeply contested inter-ethnic political landscape fraught with dangerous interactions

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<sup>92</sup> “Lưới Trời Khó Tránh. Paul Daron Đã Bị Xử Tại Toàn Án Trưng Trị Sài Gòn (Phần Tiếp Theo) [Crime Does Not Pay. Paul Daron Prosecuted at the Sài Gòn’s Justice Court, (Continued)],” *Hà Thành Ngọ Báo*, No. 663, 19 November 1929. TVQGVN Newspapers Collection.

<sup>93</sup> “Ý Kiến Của Chúng Tôi Với Thời Sự [Our Opinions towards Contemporary Events],” *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* [The Woman’s Daily], 24 October 1929, p. 7. TVQGVN Newspapers Collection.

and unpredictable encounters.<sup>94</sup> In the case of regulating Chinese gambling activities, the colonial state and its laws, in the words of Jonathan Saha, “were not a monolithic, self-evident and resilient entity...and instead...was an irreducible bricolage of practices and institutions, historically contingent and open to multiple interpretations.”<sup>95</sup>

## Conclusion

Erica J. Peters, in describing the French’s shifting approaches to policing colonial vices, characterizes its *modus operandi* as follows: “their only consistency was inconsistency: the French wavered constructing themselves into different (albeit overlapping) subject-position which then constrained them into acting according to corresponding principles.”<sup>96</sup> This perfectly captures the nature of French colonials’ relationship to Chinese merchants in Cochinchina by the late nineteenth century. In the domain of opium commerce, Chinese capitalist powerhouses, such as the Wang-Tai or Ban-Hap companies, helped generate critical revenue streams that functioned as the “cash-cows” providing the foundational framework for colonial capitalism. Enormous profits from opium revenue farm enabled colonists to address major administrative and financial issues confronting a young colonial state in the aftermath of conquest. As a result, despite recurring doubts and qualms about the potentially detrimental effects of opium on the native—“the poison of the people” as one

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<sup>94</sup> “Vua Bạc Ở Nam Kỳ. Paul Daron bị Phạt 5 Tháng Tù và Một Nghìn Quan Tiền Phạt [The King of Gambling. Paul Daron Sentenced to 5 Months in Prison and Fined 1000 *quan*,” *Hà Thành Ngộ Báo*, No. 657, 11 October 1929. On the next day, unhappy with the charge, Sáu Ngộ threatened to escalate his case to the highest court. See “Vua Gá-Bạc ở Nam Kỳ. Paul Daron Chống Án lên Tòa Thượng Thẩm [The King of Gamble in Cochinchina. Paul Daron to Contest Charge in High Court,” *Hà Thành Ngộ Báo*, No. 658, 12 October 1929. TVQGVN Newspapers Collection.

<sup>95</sup> Jonathan Saha, “A Mockery of Justice? Colonial Law, the Everyday State and Village Politics in the Burma Delta, c. 1890-1910,” *Past & Present*, no. 217 (2012): 187–212, p. 190.

<sup>96</sup> Erica J. Peters, “Negotiating Power through Everyday Practices in French Vietnam, 1880–1924” (Ph.D., United States -- Illinois, The University of Chicago, 2000), p. 262.

colonists put it—and the constraints it might place on pacification, the French maintained a facilitative approach towards existing Chinese enterprises who synergically depended on the infrastructural development and fiscal privileges offered by French policies to expand their influences. In constructing this profitable commercial opium network, Chinese merchants leveraged its competitive advantages and quickly consolidated their dominance in the interregional markets by drawing their energy, resources, and connections from a thriving inter-Asian web of commerce with nodes in Canton and the Straits Settlements. The invention of a state-led opium *régie*, which displaced this former economic model of contracting Chinese capitalists to do a “French job”, was precisely a massive overhaul of the colonial fiscal regime in direct responses to what colonists viewed as a threat both to the legitimacy of colonial rule and to its ability to bring unfettered Chinese capitalism under control. It should be emphasized that it was no coincidence that this decision to break away from Chinese monopoly took place in 1883 when the colonial state was concurrently experiencing a high drive toward a colony-wide centralization and finding itself ready—with other monopoly regimes underway—to re-consolidate its budget as well as revenue structure.

The involvement of Chinese secret societies and their close ties with Chinese business magnates made the colonial authority even more anxious and thus provided another layer of justifications for maintaining social orders on the ground of curbing Chinese economic influences. In addition to opium, the case of Chinese gambling proved to be an intriguing circumstance in which French self-contradictory stances undermined its own surveillance and repression efforts. Even though staged raiding as crucial component of performative politics enabled colonists to upkeep the moral high ground, gambling, as an undeniably profitable market, was generally tolerated as a Chinese practice, which, as the chapter shows,

attracted continuing investments and a certain clientele in Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn. Chinese owners of gambling houses (or *cercles*) took advantage of internal connections to the colonial police and municipal authority to operate and legitimize their businesses in the face of colonial regulations. But once a prominent Chinese gamblers, known to be well-protected by exceptional colonial precedents, made the high court, the colonial authority's positions towards gambling shifted as the threats of blurred social distinctions—between Chinese, Vietnamese, and Europeans— suddenly outweighed gambling's lucrativeness as gamblers stuck together in closed, surreptitious spaces undeterred by colonial laws. This half-hearted “tolerance in the guise of repression” created a morally contradictory situation for the colonial state in the subsequent periods to come. A thriving Chinese informal economy continued unabated through the back channel in dense urban areas, across the Delta riverine, and at the border frontiers.<sup>97</sup> The Chinese community, in the quest towards co-existence, continued to be viewed as “mobile” political, social, and cultural threats in the first half of the twentieth century. The next chapter will turn to explore how the colonial state devised an immigration system to identify and criminalize subversive Chinese and how migrant communities navigated its structure.

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<sup>97</sup> For example, Christopher Goscha discusses the role of illicit trade networks in providing critical resources to Vietnamese revolutionary forces at the Thai-Vietnamese borderland. See Christopher E. Goscha, *Thailand and the Southeast Asian Networks of the Vietnamese Revolution, 1885-1954*, Nordic Institute of Asian Studies Monograph Series (London: Curzon Press, 1999).



### **CHAPTER III**

#### **Policing Mobile Subjects: Chinese Immigration, French Control, and the Limits of Technocratic Surveillance**

*“Our French neighbor seems to find some difficulty in managing the Chinese in their colony...One does not know which to admire most, the impudence with which the Chinese who reside in Cochinchina, and contribute, so to speak, nothing to the revenue, pose themselves as masters and try to make law for the other inhabitants, or the carelessness with which the officials allow this insolence of the sons of the Celestial Empire to develop itself.”*

—British official<sup>1</sup>

On April 2, 1909, Bondy Riario, a representative of the French consulate in Singapore, sent a letter to Stephen Pichon, the Minister of Foreign Affairs in Paris, alerting him to a developing situation in the Straits Settlement. This document, entitled “The Situation of the Chinese in Singapore vis-à-vis the British Authority and the Consular Representative of their Country of Origin,” offered an in-depth study of the social and political structure of the Chinese communities in Singapore that also closely examined British policies towards this population. The agenda of this report, as Riario made clear in this correspondence, was to “provide the government of French Indochina a lesson in how effective British precautions applied in the Straits could be more or less adapted here to control the status of our Chinese residents.” He concluded the report with a cue, signaling that the Chinese had neither patriotic aspirations nor political ambitions. If the French government followed what the British did— “to take into consideration their customs, their views, and even their superstitions to keep them in their mind and be strategic about granting Chinese

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<sup>1</sup> “The Character of the Chinese in Sàì Gòn,” *The North China Herald and Supreme Court & Consular Gazette*, June 15, 1880.

privileges”—they would not pose a threat to the colonial order.<sup>2</sup> Undoubtedly, this exchange reveals the centrality of the control of Chinese migrants to French colonial rule.

In *fin de siècle* Southeast Asia, European colonial regimes shared a common concern about preserving the stability of imperial governance in the face of proliferating Chinese migration. Sunil Amrith defined the 1850-1930 period as “the Asian age of a mobile revolution” characterized by the continuation of formerly long-distant mercantile and labor networks prevalent in the early modern period, but now accelerated by the expansion of colonial capitalism and the dramatic transformations in transportation and technology. During this crucial phase of intensified global migration, it is estimated that from 1891 to 1900, 1,875,423 Chinese migrants entered Southeast Asia. This number consistently rose in each subsequent decade, to 2,500,000 by 1910, 2,465,449 by 1920, and 3,818,103 migrants by 1930.<sup>3</sup> The development of colonial port cities, like Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn, provided the essential gateways to developing frontiers of industrial plantations in the interior and the numerous opportunities associated with the burgeoning of commercial trade. This induced continuous streams of Chinese migrants to Indochina who found job opportunities as coolies in the rubber plantation and the mining industry, as manual labor at shipyards or cultivators in the Mekong Delta rice fields, and often as workers in the urban makeshift service industry. The number of Chinese residing in Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn, according to the Director of Native Affairs Lucien de Grammont, thus increased exponentially, from a reported 40,000 people in 1866 to 96,459 by 1907 and 120,605 by 1918.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> « M. de Bondy Riario, Consul de France à Singapore à Monsieur Stephen Pichon, Ministre des Affaires Étrangères Paris, » 2 April 1909, GOUCOCH L.13 N5555. TTLTQG-II, HCMC.

<sup>3</sup> Sunil S. Amrith, *Migration and Diaspora in Modern Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 29-30.

<sup>4</sup> André Baudrit, *Guide Historique des Rues de Sài Gòn*, 1<sup>re</sup> Edition, (Sài Gòn :S.I.L.I, 1943), p. 74-75.

The above British colonial official's mockery of the French government's failure to tame their "Chinese subjects" exposed a familiar and perturbing political *impasse* facing the French colonial state: its struggle to control Chinese mobility and to remove what many then perceived as the "Chinese cyst" (*le kyste Chinoises*) in Cochinchina.<sup>5</sup> Beginning in the 1870s, the French cast "the Chinese problem" as an important element of the colonial discourse that informed their policies and took on the onerous task of making it harder for immigrant Chinese to settle in the colony. This chapter explores the manifold political processes in which the French developed and tried to perfect a system of immigration surveillance in response to what they viewed as the prominent threats of mobile Chinese at the turn of the twentieth century. It argues that this colonial "regime of migration" was not simply a monolithic product of domination characteristic of a panoptic colonial state seeking to control the movements of its subjects, but a multilayered one motivated by the exigent economic and political imperatives of empire. This system, far from a hegemonic project, required contingent subjugation as well as negotiations and collaborations with local Chinese institutions. To cope with the evolution of Chinese migratory networks and continuing resistance, the French authority, frequently challenged by their own contradictory attitude towards Chinese migrants as essential middlemen and menaces, had to continuously adapt and reinvent its control mechanisms in the process. This dynamic relationship remained a central tenet to understanding not only the nature of French rule in Cochinchina but also Chinese migrants' roles in shaping imperial legality and its institutional transformations.

Three major drivers propelled the French obsession with controlling Chinese movements and taxonomizing their identities: profitable tax revenues; colonial concerns about the dangerous implications of mobile Chinese commercial and political networks; and maintaining a diplomatic

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<sup>5</sup> "Variété, Foules d'Asie. Les Chinois en Indochine Française," *L'Eveil Economique de l'Indochine : Bulletin Hebdomadaire*/Directeur : H. Cucherousset, rédacteur en chef. Novembre 05 1930.

check and balance with Republican China that now accelerated its effort to forge multiple linkages with the Chinese communities in Vietnam. This chapter thus further examines the permutations of French bureaucratic practices to manage what they now viewed as an intractable “race of people” as borders became more porous, commercial networks greased cities toward intensive exchanges and transnational mobility, and revolutionaries infiltrated colonial port cities to mobilize support beyond China, thus instilling in the authority a pervasive fear of Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn’s being transformed into a center of anti-French resistance.

Yet, this evolution of colonial surveillance, circumvented by the French attempts to reconcile the contradictions in its structure of domination and Chinese transnationalism, created grey areas that enabled Chinese migrants to creatively respond to the colonial state. Foregrounding the complexity of diasporic identity formation, the chapter also reconstructs a history of Chinese individuals’ and community’s resistance. It highlights the malleable nature of Chinese claims to identities not only as a product of a reflexive political engagement with the colonial legal regime but also as a powerful component of a repertoire of subversive practices invented to bypass regulations in a contested field of deeply unequal power relations.

### **Foundations of Immigration Control: Chinese Congregations**

Chinese congregations, as a political unit and form of community organization, provided the basis for the making of the French migration regime. We therefore begin by examining the structure of Chinese congregations, the roles and responsibilities of congregation leaders, and how the French administration continuously revised regulatory decrees to mold this system into an instrument of colonial statecraft. Urban congregations, much similar to the multifunctional native-place associations that Bryna Goodman meticulously documents in her work on extraterritorial

Shanghai, managed all aspects of members' livelihoods while providing newly arrived immigrants with the beneficial resources to orient their settlement.<sup>6</sup>

Congregation leaders, chosen from a list of nominees elected by their members and ultimately appointed with French approvals, played a dual role: collecting tax revenue on behalf of the colonial government and policing "a foreign population whose alien culture and community solidarity made it difficult to tax and govern in a more direct way."<sup>7</sup> French colonists, realizing the utility of existing congregational power over their admitted members, further reinforced the inseparable ties between Chinese migrants in Cochinchina and their respective congregations by making membership compulsory with the ordinance of 23 January 1885.<sup>8</sup> Thereafter, the French relied heavily on this system of congregations to establish a centralized control, closely monitor Chinese movements, manage their legal statuses, and punish those deemed to be a danger to sociopolitical stability. Chinese congregation leaders served as crucial agents mobilized by the state to fulfill such political responsibilities, hence providing the indispensable legworks central to the creation and proper functioning of the French migration regime. This later involved the development of an official bureau that collected immigrants' head tax and the implementation of various surveillance programs, including entry/exit certificates and anthropometry.

While congregations certainly played a key role in the social, cultural, spiritual, and educational lives of their members (see chapter 4), the French authority depended on congregation chiefs to register, control, and legislate Chinese migratory movements. This system of congregations had a long and complex history rooted in the earlier political interactions between

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<sup>6</sup> Bryna Goodman, *Native Place, City, and Nation: Regional Networks and Identities in Shanghai, 1853-1937* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

<sup>7</sup> W. E Willmott, "Congregations and Associations: The Political Structure of the Chinese Community in Phnom-Penh, Cambodia," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 11, no. 3 (1969): 282–301, p. 284.

<sup>8</sup> Jean Andre LaFargue, *L'Immigration Chinoise en Indochine : Sa réglementation, Ses Conséquences Economiques et Politiques*, (Paris : H. Jouve, 1909), pp. 206-208.

Chinese frontier settlers in the Mekong Delta and the Nguyễn imperial dynasty. Prior to the French arrival in 1857 and the colonial conquest of Cochinchina in 1862, Chinese migrants had already been regulated by a system in place called *bang* (or *huiguan*) that was introduced in 1807 by emperor Gia Long who officialized a new administrative unit that grouped Chinese communities into five ethnolinguistic groups (*ngũ bang*). Each of these groups, reflective of representative migrant-sending epicenters in southern China, Guangdong, Chaozhou (or Teochew), Fujian, Hainan, and Hakka, would be represented by Chinese chiefs with a title of *bang trưởng* (chief overseers) in charge of communicating with the imperial government about important matters of taxation, immigration regulations, membership rules, and subsistence.<sup>9</sup> The geographer Nguyễn Siêu estimated in a study of seven sub-prefectures in Biên Hòa province that under the rulership of emperor Tự Đức (1847-1883), at least 7 Chinese congregations existed in all 408 surveyed villages. Between 1829 and 1830, 1,114 Chinese arrived at the district of Gia Định. From the last two months of 1830 to the first four months of 1831, about 1,640 others settled in the area.<sup>10</sup> The political reach of congregational administrative power extended across an increasingly large population of Chinese migrants, from 44,000 in 1879 to roughly 69,475 in 1881, marking a period of rising colonial attention to Chinese immigrant enclaves.<sup>11</sup>

French colonists were well aware of the significant Chinese presence in this region and the Nguyễn dynasty's decade-long attempt to regulate migrants' movements. They soon appropriated the structure of the previous *bang* system as a legal blueprint rather than completely reinvent it, but made important reorganizations to further accelerate its efficiency. As a result, French

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<sup>9</sup> Yeri Urban, « Congrégation Chinoise et Responsabilité en Indochine Française, » *Actes des Journées Internationales de la Société d'Histoire du Droit de Tours* (1<sup>er</sup>-4 Juin 2018), PULIM, 2019, p. 4.

<sup>10</sup> Nguyễn Thế Anh, "L'immigration chinoise et la colonisation du delta du Mékong," *The Vietnam Review* 1 (Autumn-Winter 1996), pp. 154-177.

<sup>11</sup> Nguyễn Siêu, *Phương Đình Du Địa Chí* [The Geography of Phương Đình], Sài Gòn: 1959, pp. 167-170. Cited in Nguyễn Thế Anh, "L'immigration chinoise et la colonisation du delta du Mékong."

administrators implemented a host of formal rules to alter congregational structure to their advantage and incorporate it into the colonial state bureaucracy while introducing new surveillance technology apparatuses to strengthen the regime. The first phase of this process of incorporation began with the institutionalization of a rebranded system called *congrégation Chinois* that recognized the legal existence of seven associations (Canton, Fujian, Hakka, Chaozhou, Fuzhou, and Quanzhou) for tax purposes.<sup>12</sup> This was followed by a series of legal modifications that reduced the suffrage capacity of congregational membership as proclaimed earlier by republican principle—that congregational chiefs would be democratically elected by their representing constituents—and instead introduce new legislations enabling the colonial state to dictate the specific duties of congregation leaders as well as their tenure terms and tax eligibility.<sup>13</sup>

As prefaced, Chinese congregations had a dual obligation to the colonial state and the Chinese communities. As for the former, political responsibility rested in the hands of Chinese leaders to provide the many functions of immigration policing that pertained to the in-and-out movements of not only their constituents but also of newcomers to the colony. Elected congregation chiefs and *sous-chiefs*, wholly responsible for ensuring that any newly admitted members obtained their residence permits, were expected to be committed advocates of civil law that entailed supervising congregational activities. As such, they worked hand in hand with colonial bureaucrats and local notables “to police the congregation and were entitled to call upon the arm of the law to exercise its authority.”<sup>14</sup> Colonial law required Chinese congregation chiefs

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<sup>12</sup> Tracy C. Barrett, *The Chinese Diaspora in Southeast Asia: The Overseas Chinese in Indo-China*, (London: Tauris, 2012). It should be noted that the Quanzhou and Fuzhou sub-ethnic groups were later tacitly removed in the decree of 16 October 1906, collapsing into the Fujian Congregation and thus reducing the number of recognized congregations to five official ones.

<sup>13</sup> Arrêté 19 février 1890. « Cochinchine-règlementation de l’Immigration Asiatique, » in Gabriel Michel, *Code Judiciaire de L’Indochine : Lois, Décrets et Arrêtés Concernant le Service Judiciaire et Applicables par les cours et les Tribunaux de l’Indochine*. Tome 1, 1904-1913. BNF.

<sup>14</sup> Alain G. Marsot, *The Chinese Community in Vietnam under the French* (San Francisco: EmText, 1993), p. 107.

to submit monthly registers that documented in detail in French and Chinese a comprehensive range of information from their members—their names, residential addresses, and whereabouts—and to notify the government of any changes that took place. Congregation heads were also in charge of expelling troublemakers who might challenge colonial rule and defy the laws.<sup>15</sup>

In addition to being a tool of immigration control, the top-down structure of Chinese congregations shaped by colonial design allowed congregation heads to collect due taxes from their members with French administrative protection. This was a unique feature of the French treatment of Chinese congregation chiefs in Cochinchina compared to that in the Tonkin protectorate. In Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn, the colonial government granted congregations a legal designation of moral persons (*personnes morales de droit public colonial*) whereas outside of Cochinchina they were recognized only as voluntary associations.<sup>16</sup> Chinese residents of Cochinchina faced three forms of taxes imposed upon them: a direct tax (or head tax), an indirect municipal and provincial tax, and a direct income tax.<sup>17</sup> This taxation scheme, especially head tax and entry immigration tax, provided a crucial source of revenue to the French annual budget. For instance, in 1878, taxes were collected from 18,584 Chinese migrants who settled in Cochinchina, resulting in a sum of 1,005,367 piastres. Over the course of four years, the total tax revenue collected consistently remained above the one million piastres mark. While experiencing a few years of decline from 1882 to 1886, revenue picked up again in 1887 and surged to 1,577,653 piastres.<sup>18</sup> It is certainly unrealistic to assume that congregation chiefs exercised unchallenged

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<sup>15</sup> Nguyễn Quốc Định, *Les Congrégations Chinoises en Indochine Française*, (Paris : Recuei Sirey, 1941), pp. 54.

<sup>16</sup> Melissa Cheung, “The Legal Position of Ethnic Chinese in Indochina under French Rule,” in M. B. Hooker, ed., *Law and the Chinese in Southeast Asia* (Pasir Panjang, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2002), p. 41.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, p. 43.

<sup>18</sup> E. Delamarre, *L'Emigration et L'Immigration Ouvrière En Indochine*, Section Des Services D'Intérêt Social, Inspection Générale du Travail De L'Indochine, (Hà Nội :Imprimerie D'Extrême-Orient, 1931), pp. 47-48.



authority in the process of enforcing colonial regulation. In practice, heavy imposition of tax categories, for example, would, on a few occasions, be condemned by Chinese congregational members as exploitative, resulting in impediments to the administrative attempt to implement such policy—a point we will soon return to. Regardless, French built-in incentives that exempted congregation heads from the poll tax while codifying strict penalty legislations into colonial law sought to achieve the outcome of implicating congregation chiefs into its system of surveillance as a means of indirect rule.

## **Curbing Chinese Mobility: Instruments, Interactions, and Challenges**

### ***The Economics of Migration: Capitation Taxes***

Capitation (also poll or head) tax was one of the most widely used and controversial components of the French immigration policies in Indochina. Widely known as an *ancien régime* that shaped the fundamental fiscal and revenue structure of empires, poll taxes, along with state monopoly, was acknowledged by scholars as the major instruments of revenue extraction crucial to colonial empire-building.<sup>19</sup> However, its roles in controlling Chinese migrants labors' mobility have been less appreciated. In colonial Indochina, this form of fiscal control could be traced, first and foremost, in a desire to curb what the colonial authority viewed as unrestrained Chinese economic influences.

Although the hefty capitation tax was originally conceived as an instrument to legitimize the accumulation of state revenue, it was soon reinvented and promoted by colonial officials opposed

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<sup>19</sup> Dennis Cogneau, Yannick Dupraz, Sandrine Mesple-Somps, "Fiscal Capacity and Dualism in Colonial States: The French Empire, 1830-1062," *HAL*, Working Paper Series, 24 Feb 2019, p. 9. Recent works on the French monopoly system include, for example, Gerard Sasges, *Imperial Intoxication: Alcohol and the Making of Colonial Indochina* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2017); see also Stephen H. Roberts, *The History of French Colonial Policy, 1870-1925* (Routledge, 2019).

to immigration as a method of discouraging Chinese entries into Cochinchina. Starting from Tonkin, anxious French colons had raised a red flag over what they considered as “unchecked immigration of Chinese into the possessions of France in Indochina.” They encouraged the colonial authority to increase the poll tax rates as “a powerful check on the predominance of that hated personality.” Although more moderate colonists tried to make the legal distinction between “useful laborers” as the essential forces for frontier settlement in rather large and uncultivated tracts of land in the South and “dangerous tradesmen” who controlled a large portion of the colony’s lucrative trade, they advocated the adoption of capitation taxes (*capitation de impôts*) as a direct measure to contain the latter and characterized the outflow of traders to the colony a true “embodiment of the yellow peril.”<sup>20</sup>

With the development of an impending immigration bureau, French officials often justified restrictive border-policing measures by the exigency of improving state security and safeguarding the colony from dangerous infiltrators. However, it is clear that taxing the Chinese was a conscious choice that fulfilled an important economic imperative. For one, colonists often saw Chinese migrants as the ideal tax-payers because the predominant French view held that the Chinese had to reciprocate the colonial state for offering them opportunities unavailable elsewhere. For example, *L’Eveil Economique* echoed this sentiment, stating that:

All over Indochina, the Chinese enjoy our full and unrestricted property rights...the only foreigners to be admitted to public auctions and granted advantageous custom tariff beneficial to their commerce. Chinese boats circulating in Indochina are not required to observe French legislation unlike the merchant navy in the colony, thus facilitating the Chinese to become masters of the country’s waterways free to operate in even the smallest *arroyo*...While the Chinese have rendered great service to Indochina, he has to give more in the future. As for us, wanting to do without them is nonsense and madness.”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> “French Indochina, The Yellow Danger,” *The Straits Times*, 26 February 1897. NewspaperSG, NLB.

<sup>21</sup> “Les Chinois en Indochine,” *La Revue Economique de Extrême-Orient*, 5 Septembre, 1927. BNF.

In addition to requiring the Chinese to pay their fair share through tax contributions, the French found Chinese migrants' status as foreigners who lacked legal protections an easy target. By exploiting extant community structures and implementing a new legislation, the colonial regime could extract more tax revenue from this population. The colonial adoption of Chinese congregations as state-designated institutions with the fiscal authority to collect taxes and settle commercial disputes among their members was a moving piece towards the consolidation of the capitation tax scheme. The implementation of head tax began with the decree of October 5, 1871 wherein a first increase in tax burden from a previously intermittent measure was formally enforced. The Service of Immigration categorized Chinese migrants into three narrow types of taxpayers. First and second class of traders, assessed by the values of their business licenses, shouldered a fixed 300 piastres while the other two, including other types of merchants and indentured labor, paid 100 and 25 piastres respectively. Strict administrative measures accompanied this tax policy, which included regulations of payment dates, imprisonment for insolvency, and deportation, to ensure all migrants fulfilled their financial obligations.<sup>22</sup>

To efficiently legislate head taxes, the colonial administration needed to navigate through two mutually enforcing contradictions and make corresponding adjustments. On the one hand, from a juridical standpoint, the tax was devised as a legal deterrence to unchecked and free immigration. Yet, the exigent need of migrant labor, especially in light of the expansive colonial modernization in the late nineteenth century, necessitated room for legal exceptions. On the other hand, the influx of vagrant and impecunious Chinese coolies would at the same time pose significant foreseeable threats of tax evasions, leading to a loss in taxable income and worsening the colonial deficit. The French regime subsequently tried to resolve this conundrum by further

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<sup>22</sup> *Etudes Sur la Cochinchine Française de L'Immigration en Cochinchine*, Par Vimeux, Employé Attache au Service de L'Immigration à Sàì Gòn, (Paris : Challamel Aine, 1874), p. 11-15.

developing a 6-tier hierarchy of taxpayers that relied on the patent-based system of trade licenses. On the basis of this structure, an official increase in tax rates followed with the decree of February 15, 1889. At the top rank, all notable Chinese merchants, including those who owned factories and non-commercial real estates, paid a fixed sum of 400 piastres. For the other five categories, taxes were progressively lowered to 200, 100, 50, and 20 piastres in accordance with the declining patent values. According to this formula, Chinese petty traders, wage labor, and coolies as the poorest class of colonial society paid the lowest poll tax amount of 10 piastres.<sup>23</sup> However, in practice, for a caste of people who made the least amount of gross annual income, the jump in tax rates was decidedly drastic with an estimated 30 to 180% increase from 1890 to 1897. As an illustration, Massimo Galluppi points out that the head tax was especially onerous to a Chinese coolie to whom 10 piastres of tax payment would mean 10 to 20 days of work.<sup>24</sup> For comparison, Vietnamese coolies would earn an average of 9 piastres per month and paid a head tax of 5 and a half piastres.<sup>25</sup> The lowest strata of the Chinese in this system undoubtedly bore the highest tax burden. Unsurprisingly, to facilitate colonial development, specific classes of Chinese were strategically excluded from this poll-tax mechanism. This included, among others, the heads of Chinese congregations and Chinese agricultural workers employed by European firms or naturalized French citizens.

While high poll taxes served to deter “illegal” Chinese immigration into the colony, their regressive nature had a perverse effect on the landscape of social and political relations in Sài Gòn-

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<sup>23</sup> Rene Dubreuil, *De la Condition des Chinois et de leur Rôle Economique en Indochine*, (Bar-sur-Seine [France] : Impr. Ve. C. Saillard, 1910), p. 25.

<sup>24</sup> Massimo Galluppi, “The Chinese in French Cochinchina and the 1906 Commission: A Study on Collaboration,” *Annali dell’Università degli studi di Napoli “L’Orientale,”* Rivista del Dipartimento di Studi Asiatici e del Dipartimento di Studi e Ricerche su Africa e Paesi Arabi, 1986 (46/2): 221-276, p. 245.

<sup>25</sup> Martin Thomas, *The French Empire Between the Wars: Imperialism, Politics and Society* (Manchester University Press, 2005), p. 127.

Chợ Lớn where communities of poor migrant workers bore the brunt of persistently rising tax rates, resulting in unavoidable confrontations. Scholarship tends to give the impression that French exploitative head tax was a recurring irritant to disagreeable Chinese, but their resistance was predominantly genteel.<sup>26</sup> This characterization underestimates the governing challenge that the French authority confronted in working with congregation chiefs and the class divide between rich and poor Chinese that complicated congregational leadership. As a result, it overlooks the frequent class-based internal dissensions that configured colonial politics wherein both Chinese elites and the French authority faced as a result of the new policies.

In fact, Chinese indignation reached a high point when the French officials, according to the *Courrier de Sài Gòn*, announced a sudden raise in tax rates from \$9.1 to \$12.5 a head in 1897. The Cantonese congregation turned overnight a turbulent site of conflicts. A large group of Chinese coolies congregated around their headman's office and "mobbed him for not preventing the increase." The colonial police plunged in to intervene and to prevent the chief from being attacked and killed by his clansmen. This bloody confrontation was only the beginning of what was to come: a series of prolonged anti-poll tax demonstrations that targeted the administration's tendency to tax poor coolies and rich traders at the same fixed rates, which fueled a strong sense of class antagonism throughout the city. As they demonstrated in the streets, Cantonese members thronged the neighborhood and continued to intimidate the congregation leader until he committed to appealing to the authority for a tax reduction. Secret societies, often treated by French colonists as members of the underclass on the fringe of society, were also entangled in the protests and reported to have sent death threats to congregational heads. As French police reported, the peak in

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<sup>26</sup> Barrett, *The Chinese Diaspora in Southeast Asia*, p. 175.

assassination cases and attempts around this time seemed allegedly the work of these secret society members.<sup>27</sup>

Since congregational leaders were, at least in law, appointed by popular votes, they would continue to earn the trust of fellow members by protecting community's interests while communicating their constituents' voices to the colonial state. Consequently, leaders treaded a thin line between their sworn protective roles as the benefactors of the migrants' community and their administrative duty as colonial employees to collect head taxes. The exorbitant poll tax therefore risked undermining the credibility of congregation chiefs, often a leading issue that propelled Chinese workers to rise to the frontline and protest. On March 16, 1897, 300 Chinese coolies again formed an energetic crowd and occupied the front of the Cantonese congregation office in Rue Chaigneau that was located near the police station. In an effort to pacify his indignant countrymen, the chief of the congregation, a printer named Nam Tai, explained to the fuming protesters that the colonial government did not consult him on the tax rate decision. Without much success, a violent brawl erupted. Within the riotous crowd stood an angry protester who, without hesitation, "lifted a chair and hurled it at the unfortunate Nam Tai." The feud riled up other participants, who then proceeded to smashing the properties of the congregational office. In the name of protecting the Chinese chief from being murdered and preventing further public disturbance, the municipal government in Chợ Lớn deployed four native guards and ordered further police reinforcement to the scene to quell the riots.<sup>28</sup>

Journalist Nam Fong, writing for the *China Truth*, cited the "oppressive tax policy" as a locus of social unrest, political discontent, and transgression among Chinese migrant communities in

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<sup>27</sup> "The Poll Tax," *The Straits Times*, 26 February 1897. NewspaperSG, NLB.

<sup>28</sup> "The Chinese Poll-Tax in French Colonies," *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser (Weekly)*, 16 March 1897. NewspaperSG, NLB.

Cochinchina.<sup>29</sup> On a few rare occasions, the Qing government initiated the effort to abolish the poll tax between 1886 and 1893 in a renewed attempt to forge a link with the Chinese communities in Indochina. In actuality, it already began to do so as early as in 1878, less than a decade after the inception of the tax policy, when a Qing diplomatic mission, in the spirit of the self-strengthening movements, traveled to the French colony, recorded their observations, and provided tips to emperor Guangxu. As a member of this commission and the liberal pro-Westernization faction of the Qing court (*Yang Wu Pai* 洋務派), an official named Yuan Zuzhi 袁祖志 made the trip to Sài Gòn and produced an overseas note that detailed the French exploitation of Chinese migrants by taxes, a system he claimed to “have no formal legal basis to exist there.”<sup>30</sup> However, French colonial officials offered lackluster responses and ultimately rejected these petitions despite recurring political grievances over the poll tax.<sup>31</sup> Conscientious colonial moderates, anxious about the magnitude of economic and physical destructions brought about by streams of protests and unmitigated Chinese resentment, expressed their sympathy to these destitute Chinese and favored a more progressive tax program that shifted the burden to big earners in Chợ Lớn.<sup>32</sup> However, in the early 1900s, given continuing stagnant wages, an unstable economy, and virtually non-existent tax reform (see chapter 1), widespread tax evasion was imminent and later described by a colonial official as an endemic phenomenon among the Chinese. Colonial reports counted 600 cases of expulsion in 1904 alone for failure to pay taxes, which rose persistently to 1324 cases in 1905 and

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<sup>29</sup> Nam Fong, “Chinese Under French Rule in Indochina,” *The China Weekly Review* (1923-1950), Reprinted from *China Truth*, 17 May 1930.

<sup>30</sup> Ping Zhaolong and Wang Yuanlin, “Nanling Weibi Shi: ‘Wanqing Haiwai Biji Xuan’ Zhong Suo Zai de Xigong, 南嶺未必識晚清海外筆記選中所載的西貢 [Southern Neighbors Not Know: Sài Gòn Described in Selection of the Late Qing Overseas Notes, “*Dongnan Ya Yanjiu* 東南亞研究, No 3, 2014, p. 89.

<sup>31</sup> Jean Andre LaFargue, *L'Immigration Chinoise en Indochine*, p. 91.

<sup>32</sup> “The Chinese Poll-Tax in the French Colonies. Disturbances at Sài Gòn,” *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser* (Weekly), 16 March 1897. NL 1933. NewspaperSG, NLB.

1481 in 1906.<sup>33</sup> Meanwhile, means of tax violation as subversion of the colonial order, to be examined in detail later in the chapter, metamorphosed quickly in response to the burdensome penalties imposed by the colonial state.

For the wealthy Chinese, manipulations of their legal identities and occasional bribes enabled them to bypass legal punishments while their poorer compatriots with less financial and social capital resorted to the common practices of identity frauds or clandestine expatriation to escape from the tax-enforcing authority.<sup>34</sup> In Chợ Lớn, the Chinese paid \$30 per head whereas Sài Gòn's Chinese residents paid \$35.75 in comparison with an annual \$6 poll tax for the Vietnamese and full exemptions for other foreigners. As reported in 1930, every incoming Chinese migrant who disembarked at the Sài Gòn port had to pay a poll tax along with \$7.55 for medical protection service and congregational fees, excluding a separate and impending payments for mandatory vaccinations as required by French public health codes. As part of a stringent procedure to enforce the legality of poll tax and to set an example for defaulters, colonial immigration police arrested those who failed to pay this tax in public places and sent them immediately to the Immigration Detention Shed in preparation of deportation. On top of the poll tax, the 8% per annum income tax also generated considerable disputes among taxpayers as it was widely reported that French tax-collecting agents, often unable to access commercial records and examine merchants' books in Chinese, tended to arbitrarily charge a high amount. This left many merchants to engage in bribes, or a practice known colloquially as "palm greasing," as the only recourse to declare a lower income and reduce their annual tax payments.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Paul Beau, *Situation de l'Indochine de 1902 à 1907*, Tome I (Sài Gòn : Impr. commerciale Marcellin Rey, 1908), p. 126.

<sup>34</sup> "Chinese Jailed for Taxes in Sài Gòn," *The China Press* (1925-1938), 3 October 1933.

<sup>35</sup> Nam Fong, "Chinese Under French Rule in Indochina," *The China Weekly Review* (1923-1950), Reprinted from *China Truth*, 17 May 1930.



The insistent preservation of colonial fiscal orthodoxy in the face of an indignant population of “essential intermediaries” and the Qing early diplomatic interference is seemingly baffling at first glance. However, a closer look at the historical events around the turn of the twentieth century revealed the colonial state’s renewed priorities. At a time when heavy taxation thickened the colonial budget and helped justify immigration restrictions, the presence of anti-imperial revolutionaries alerted colonial officials to the impending danger of an interconnected world that ironically obliterated any urgent need for fiscal reform. The ever-expanding presence of secret societies and their transnational enterprises as well as the evolving nationalist politics in China warranted an immediate commitment to migration control. As a result, administrative energy was now directed to the development of a full-fledged immigration surveillance regime. The problematic capitation tax scheme was concurrently maintained in the illusory belief that the failure of its bureaucratic implementation, as evidenced in cases of rampant evasion, was the result of imperfect policing measures. A new system of entry restriction and identification soon preoccupied the colonial state as it tried to effectively oversee Chinese movements and strengthen colonial control.

### ***Dangerous Chinese Networks and the Making of the French Surveillance Apparatuses***

French colonial policies directed toward Chinese migrant communities in Cochinchina had been persistently limited by two layers of ambivalence. On the one hand, the French recognized Chinese migrants as essential intermediaries in their quest towards successful colonization and, as legal scholar Melissa Cheung describes, as a key chess piece in “a balancing act between the French interest in developing it [Indochina] as a ‘back door’ to China, the economic interests and

power of the Chinese community, and the latent resentment of the local population towards the Chinese stranglehold over the economy.”<sup>36</sup> One colonial author expressed this point:

The Chinese has always been the masters of commerce in the Far East. Wherever they go, Siam, Singapore, Java, the Philippine, etc., they exhibit exceptional qualities of intelligence, skills, and endurance, which surprised us even more since they had to deal with other indolent, primitive races...Without the Chinese, Indochina would fall outside the Far Eastern trade movements and it would forge no links with the larger neighbors. As such, a Chinese trader constituted a precious element, one is tempted to say, irreplaceable one of the Indochinese economy.<sup>37</sup>

On the other hand, colonists were simultaneously intimidated by the Chinese expansion of their influence in trade, commerce, and politics, describing them derisively as “opportunists and evil capitalists.” The popularized notion of Chinese settlers as “colonial parasites” who would stop at nothing to further their agenda and to subvert colonial laws to bring down French interests, hence shaping a form of Chinese hegemony in Indochina, continued to animate colonial developmental discourses in the domain of policy discussion.<sup>38</sup> In addition to strengthening the extractive capacity of the colonial state, the French government, further motivated by the desire to keep the influx of “lawless” Chinese in check, formally established an Immigration Bureau in Sài Gòn in 1874, a political administrative body dedicated to regulating Chinese migratory and economic activities in Cochinchina.

A core principle of immigration control was thus to classify and weed out unworthy elements deemed to be threatening to the security of the colonial state. By the turn of the twentieth century, as much as the French authority occupied itself with the promulgation of a tax program to control unchecked migration, colonial attention also further shifted to revolutionaries and dangerous political infiltrators penetrating a porous border and a developing surveillance bureaucracy. This

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<sup>36</sup> Melissa Cheung, “The Legal Position of Ethnic Chinese in Indochina under French Rule,” in M. B. Hooker, ed., *Law and the Chinese in Southeast Asia* (Pasir Panjang, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2002), p. 32.

<sup>37</sup> « Les Chinois en Indochine, » *La Revue Economique de Extrême-Orient*, 5 Septembre, 1927. BNF.

<sup>38</sup> Rene Deschamps, *La main-d’œuvre en Indochine et L’immigration Étrangère*, Poitiers, 1908. BNF.

period was thus marked by the French overwhelming effort to wrestle with an increasing global mobility that arrived with the intensification of commercial and political networks, and forms of interconnectedness that accelerated the exchanges of ideas and social interactions. With the rise of Chinese nationalism in Southeast Asia, both Chinese merchant elites and lawless “scoundrels” alike were watched with an eagle eye. Additionally, the birth of Republican China as a sovereign state after centuries of dynastic ruling heralded a new era of treaty negotiations that put unprecedented pressure on the French legality, forcing it to renegotiate, adapt, and engage with the status of Chinese migrants in southern Vietnam and Indochina at large. This would become a much clearer imperative given French continuing imperial interests in China where it had established foreign concessions and exercised extraterritorial privileges since 1849.<sup>39</sup>

Since the late nineteenth century, the French, similar to the British in Singapore or the Dutch in the East Indies, persistently confronted a rise in Chinese political activities. Apart from Chinese resistance to French exploitative tax policies in the forms of labor demonstrations and protests, political gatherings and anti-European boycotts also experienced a concurrent surge in Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn. The anti-American boycott that transpired in Shanghai in the event of Chinese global protest against racial discriminations, a well-known event in Chinese-American history, energized Chợ Lớn Chinese to follow suit.<sup>40</sup> On 24 January 1906, Chinese merchants of Chợ Lớn and Tonkin commenced a mass boycott of American good, which directly undermined the commercial initiatives of the firm Denis Frères in Sài Gòn whose enormous profits relied on the American import of wheat and kerosene. As this firm filed a complaint to the administration, colonial police,

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<sup>39</sup> Mathilde Kang and Martin Munro, “The Affirmation of the French Presence in Asia,” in *Francophonie and the Orient, French-Asian Transcultural Crossings (1840-1940)* (Amsterdam University Press, 2018), 49–80.

<sup>40</sup> For a comprehensive study of this event, see Guanhua Wang, *In Search of Justice: The 1905-1906 Chinese Anti-American Boycott* (Harvard University Asia Center, 2001).

after a period of surveilling Chinese merchants' activities, intercepted one of their meetings unannounced and broke up the convention.<sup>41</sup>

As a general pattern, an increase in Chinese diasporic investments and remittances during the interwar periods also intensified the colonial paranoia about their contact and loyalty—a recurring issue that the French immigration tried to navigate from the outset. Large-scale Chinese financial projects to serve the goal of “national reconstruction” included, for example, the well-known Nanyang magnate Hu Wen-Hu who invested \$50,000,000 for the development of China's Southwest and Tan Kah Kee's donation of \$5,000,000 to organize the West China Development Company. South Sea Chinese also actively participated in strengthening their connections to China during World War II through their own initiatives. The establishment of the South Sea Chinese Comfort Mission to China (*Nan Qiao Huiguo Weiliao Tuan* 南僑回國慰勞團) furthered this momentum and consolidated the linkages between overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia and the ROC. Overseas Chinese remittances from Indochina, while experiencing a slump in the event of the global depression in 1934, consistently reached millions of dollars. In 1930, this was 10,000,000 in total and dropped to a reported 4,000,000 in 1931 in Sài Gòn.<sup>42</sup> The *Résident-Supérieur* of Tonkin worriedly remarked in a correspondence with the provincial chiefs in Cochinchina, citing considerable Chinese donations and remittances to China as disconcerting practices, that “if those Chinese who claimed to be unable to pay their taxes could send this much

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<sup>41</sup> “A Short-Lived Boycott. Stopped by the Sài Gòn Police,” *Eastern Daily Mail and Straits Morning Advertiser*, 24 January 1906. NL2975. NewspaperSG, NLB.

<sup>42</sup> T.C. Tang, “Checks of Overseas Chinese in South Seas Are Reduced,” *The China Press* (1925-1938), 11 October 1935.

money to China to support their so-called ‘works of national salvation’, they have no excuses not to fulfill their financial obligations here in our land.”<sup>43</sup>

From the late nineteenth century henceforth, the French service of immigration responded to what they viewed as an evolving external threat of Chinese infiltrators by ramping up the surveillance capacity of the anthropometric department and making various amendments to existing colonial legislations relating to the regulation of Chinese movements. The decrees of 9 February and 8 October 1897 marked a cornerstone in such a process with the creation of a new passport, visa, and residence permit system for foreign Asians and the service of anthropometric identification in Sài Gòn.<sup>44</sup> Adam McKeown argues that a racialized global melancholy order since the 1880s, shaped by anti-Asian immigration and the desire of white-settler nations to limit Chinese movements in the name of liberalism and nation-based border control, gave rise to a technocratic institutionalization of “modern” forms of identity policing such as passports.<sup>45</sup> In French Cochinchina, control of Chinese migration similarly necessitated the imperatives of an intertwined process of identification, categorization, and penalization. In other words, as Trung Vũ Nguyễn demonstrates, by encoding ethnic distinctions on systematized papers, French colonists prescribed stereotypical and race-based cultural traits as identifiers of the individuals, which had the repressive effects of subjectification and marginalization.<sup>46</sup> Identity paperwork and compulsory registrations thus supplied the state with the essential information to dictate movements while the science of anthropometry—numeric measurements of migrants’ bodies,

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<sup>43</sup> « Le Résident Supérieur en Indochine, Gouverneur P.I de la Cochinchine à Messieurs les Administrateurs, Chefs de Provinces (en Communication à M. Le Trésorier-Payeur et M. Le Chef du Service de l’Immigration, » GOUCOCH F77. N32613, 25 January 1932. TTLTQG-II, HCMC.

<sup>44</sup> *Arrêté Réorganisant le Service de l’Immigration en Cochinchine*, Gouvernement General de l’Indochine, (Sài Gòn : Impr. Commerciale, 1906), Préface. BNF.

<sup>45</sup> Adam McKeown, *Melancholy Order: Asian Migration and the Globalization of Borders*, Columbia Studies in International and Global History (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

<sup>46</sup> Trung Vũ Nguyễn, “Marginalizing Practices: Bureaucracy, Ethnography and Becoming Chinese in Colonial Vietnam” PhD Dissertation, University of Wisconsin Madison, 2009.

medical examinations, and fingerprints—acted as an interlinked form of coded state ethnography to facilitate the identification of Chinese subjects.

In 1897, Governor-General Paul Doumer appointed Victor Joseph Pottecher as the head of a new identification service that operated under the tutelage of the Immigration Bureau. This service was created to “survey and establish collections of all reports of foreign Asians residing in the territory of the colony.” After a two-year trial run, in 1899, a central commission was appointed to manage a centralized file system—the first of its kind to ever exist—that consisted of a comprehensive “database” of all Chinese migrants in Cochinchina based on fingerprints (*systèmes dactyloscopiques*).<sup>47</sup> In the early 1900s, the French attempted to make this fingerprint system mandatory for all incoming Chinese migrants while creating complementary surveillance measures to extract individual information. In addition to developing a large area for migrants’ deposit of personal belongings (*Xóm-Chiêu*), the authority required each individual to go through a thorough medical examination wherein they would be vaccinated and have their fingerprints taken on both hands before being allowed to claim their luggage. Additionally, all men over the age of fifteen must have their bodily measurements and facial traits included in complete custom reports. The adoption of required fingerprints and their add-on procedures was not wholly smooth-sailing. They encountered fierce resistance from Chinese congregational leaders in Chợ Lớn who denounced the inhumanity of such invasive methods and the humiliation they caused to the Chinese communities. Contending that fingerprint were often associated with policing measures to identify criminal suspects in China, a reporter opined that such a system was “objectionable to the Chinese people and exposed the innate European prejudices that targeted them.”<sup>48</sup> Facing

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<sup>47</sup> Ilse About, “Surveillance des identités et régime colonial en Indochine, 1890-1912,” *Criminocorpus. Revue d’Histoire de la justice, des crimes et des peines*, May 23, 2011, p.10-11.

<sup>48</sup> Nam Fong, « Chinese Under French Rule in Indochina,” *The China Weekly Review (1923-1950)*, 17 May 1930.

interminable contestations, the French resorted to a temporary halt of the fingerprint regime to satisfy the requests of the Chợ Lớn's Chinese Chamber of Commerce by alternatively requiring attached photographs to immigrants' passes. However, colonial officials reinstated the system in 1912 when they realized that "the revenues from assessed duties had decreased by half and remained detrimental to the finances of Cochinchina," ascribing this failure to the loss of colonial control over tax dodgers' widespread name-changing practices.<sup>49</sup>

While anthropometries worked hand in hand with the regime of identity paperwork that came to shape the larger structure of the French surveillance, the bureau's service department also installed an elaborate checking system at the Sài Gòn port. Before newly arrived Chinese disembarked, the passengers were asked to remain onboard and undergo a thorough examination by the police in the presence of congregation heads. The immediate presence of Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn Chinese chiefs functioned as a practical mechanism of collecting duty taxes (*impôt*) and ensuring the safe admission of "legal" members to their arranged congregations without being the potential liabilities for those chiefs. Article 7 of the decree of February 27, 1899 accelerated the execution of the regulations of stay and arrival for foreign Asians in Cochinchina. By then, the Immigration Bureau had staffed an extensive network of mobile polices—also called immigration controllers—and intelligence agents who wandered day and night on public roads and around the areas of the Sài Gòn river and Chợ Lớn to arrest potential offenders. During the same period, the French introduced a new judicial code that penalized Asian immigrants who failed to produce a residence permit issued by the heads of congregations or carry an identity card (*laissez-passer*). Failure to provide proof of legal residence upon request would result in immediate arrest and escort to the

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<sup>49</sup> « Le Chef du Service de L'Immigration et du Contrôle de la Main-d'œuvre Engagée à Monsieur le Gouverneur de la Cochinchine, Sài Gòn, » GOUCOCH F.63 N4848-02, *Observations des Chefs de Province Relatives à L'Application de la Convention Franco-Chinois du 16 Mai 1930*. TTLTQG-II, HCMC.

nearest authority. Once investigated, if there were no further possible means to establish said migrant's identities, he would be incarcerated in the Sài Gòn Central Prison and deported from the colony after a month of detainment. This draconian regulation applied equally to those with expired paperwork. To keep track of the deportees, anthropometric services would be called in to capture essential information to prevent attempted returns.<sup>50</sup>

The tiresome complexity of the French immigration bureaucracy could be confirmed in rare first-hand records of early Chinese travelers to Cochinchina by the late nineteenth century. One such account that appeared in colonial-era Singapore's Chinese newspaper *Lat Pau* 叻報 belonged to a Straits Chinese man of letter and merchant, Tan Keong Sum (or Chen Gongshan in Mandarin) who traveled to Sài Gòn via steamship in May 1888. In his travelogue, Tan recalled having arrived in Sài Gòn on April 19, 1888 and stayed for roughly a week where he journeyed to Chợ Lớn and spent a few focused days observing people's livelihood and Sino-European interactions. As the first and the earliest documentation of Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn penned by a Singaporean Chinese elite, Tan's depiction and commentaries, provide valuable insights into the elaborately stringent operation of the French immigration control targeting Chinese movements.<sup>51</sup> Approaching Sài Gòn's port on the steamship *Djemnah*, Tan was surprised to count 99 maritime security posts in total as the ship diverted from the main port and docked at a more distant inspection site. Custom

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<sup>50</sup> Nguyễn Văn Nghi, *Etude Economique Sur La Cochinchine Française*, (Montpellier : Impr. Firmin et Montaine, 1920), p. 21-23. BNF.

<sup>51</sup> While the author's personal information is scattered and incomplete, Tan Keong Sum (born in Singapore circa 1861), was the half-brother of Tan Keong Saik, a son of the prominent shipping firm owner Tan Choon Bok. Tan was later documented to have been employed by the firm Chop Hong Hin, owned by the famous Malaccan-Singaporean businessman Tan Kim Seng who also maintained business connections with Cochinchina. At a young age of 28, Tan traveled to southern Vietnam and recorded his encounters in vivid detail. On coming back to Singapore, he was encouraged by his friend Huang Peng Shan to publicize his travelogue to inform the public of his experiences, which resulted in a serialized account in the Chinese newspaper *Lat Pau* and was later reprinted in a rare book titled "Accounts of Travels in Vietnam or *Yuenan Youji* 越南游記). More information on the historical background of the travelogue and its literary significance, see David K.Y. Chng, "The *Yuenan Youji*: A Rare Book Published in Singapore (1888)," *Archipel* 43, *Etudes Interdisciplinaires Sur le Monde Insulindien*, Paris: 1992, pp. 131-137.



officers were then present on board and ordered all passengers to jump on a sampan (junk boat) to be disembarked at a nearby quay while being escorted to a building for a detailed examination. Tan could not help but express his utter surprise and disappointment at the prolonged process, especially in the accompaniment of his older parents and their servants. “Standing for two hours in this building with a tiled roof, walls made of logs, and a non-slab floor which resembled a stable more than anything while being inspected and ultimately ordered to return the next day,” he lamented, “was the most painful and dehumanizing experience I can only imagine.”<sup>52</sup> On the following day, Tan and his family came back to the custom entry checkpoint where a French policeman redirected them to another immigration office to be further questioned before a pass, also known as “a favor card,” that included an identification number, their names, and ages could be issued.

As previously explained, while French police and their Vietnamese and Chinese agents often stayed around the port to spot offenders, the French administration maintained an indirect system of immigration records by delegating the tasks to Chinese congregations. Tan Keong Sum’s complaints about the inefficiency of the system thus further elaborated on how a three-pronged procedure played out in practice. First, the aforementioned “favor card (*Renqing* 任請)” served as an official seal that admitted immigrants to their assigned congregations who would be responsible for their future activities in Cochinchina and thus also be liable for potential misdemeanors and transgression. Official registrations with congregations that certified migrants’ duration of stay as legally permitted by the state also had a second important function: to convert favor card into a

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<sup>52</sup> Tan Keong Sum, “*Yuenan Youji* 越南游記 [A Record of Travel to Vietnam],” *Lat Pau* 叻報, No 1935 and 1936, May 9, 1888. Newspapers Collection at the National University of Singapore (henceforth NCNUS). It should be noted that the Sinologist Claudine Salmon also published a French translation of the classical Chinese text. See Claudine Salmon trans., “Tan Keong Sum, *Récit d’un Voyage au Vietnam*,” *Archipel* 43, *Etudes Interdisciplinaires Sur le Monde Insulindien*, Paris: 1992, pp. 145-163.

capitation tax certificate that visitors and immigrants should carry with all the time. And lastly, this tax certificate worked as a permit to acquire an exit visa and as the only legal document approved to fulfill this formality. For foreign visitors and newly admitted immigrants, the process could take days, if not longer. A Straits Chinese and a British subject, Tan, after an 8-hour delay at the Fujianese Congregation, voiced a critical opinion of the French system as he articulated what he considered to be a “distasteful treatment of foreign visitors”:

Since I only stayed for eight days, I was luckily exempted from the head tax. Once I received a certificate of exemption, I was told to keep this document carefully and not to ever lose it because if one finds you without this paper, you will never get away with it. I was also notified that when I travel to back to Singapore, I have to go to this congregation again to return the certificate and obtain an exit visa. And then one more day, the next morning, I need to acquire an official stamp for the congregation heads before I can embark on boat to leave the territory. Exit visa will then be collected onboard by an immigration agent and I will also need to present the said congregation’s attestation to my departure. I fear that this shall not be at all a pleasant experience for anyone who pays a visit to Cochinchina.<sup>53</sup>

The development of the immigration bureaucracy reflected not only the French’s tightening control of transnational movements towards the end of the nineteenth century, but also their effort to enhance existing systems of surveillance that targeted external threats, specifically Chinese mobility that had previously enjoyed a greater degree of freedom.

If Chinese visitors, short-term residents, and poor coolies were subjected to and consumed by an intricate immigration control system, preferential treatments of those with higher statuses or with French affiliations certainly existed. Different from ordinary law, the French jurists developed a preferential regime that was intermittently practiced since the 1890s legal codes that enforced comprehensive control of Asiatic elements but now officialized in the decree of 16 August 1907 and its modified version of 4 January 1917. Asian foreigners, including Chinese, Indians, Malays, Javanese, and Arabs, registered as non-class (*hors classe*) or one of the first five ranks of trade

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<sup>53</sup> Tan Keong Sum, “*Yuenan Youji* 越南游記 [A Record of Travel to Vietnam],” *Lat Pau 叻報*, No 1936, May 9, 1888. Chinese Newspapers Collection, National University of Singapore.

patent holders, who pay an equivalent land rating, invested in or commandeered trading houses, and worked as clerks, compradors, and notables were pre-approved by the Immigration Service on the recommendation of the head of congregations and received immigration privileges.<sup>54</sup> These individuals as economic benefactors of the French administration were pre-registered with a special control board held at the Central Immigration Service and in provinces where they received a photographic identity card. This document, which cost 15 piastres for issuance and duplications, enabled them to bypass all required immigration procedures and empowered them to embark and disembark without obstruction from ships and to move freely throughout Indochina.<sup>55</sup> Given the number of established Chinese trading houses and merchants in Cochinchina that outperformed other groups, this policy thus inadvertently benefitted Chinese business elites, which later became a talking point in both intra-community's resistance to the poll tax and Vietnamese nationalist critiques of French colonial governance.

At the turn of the twentieth century, a consolidating French colonial state had laid out the essential framework of control and gradually established a formalized bureaucracy centered on the policing of Asiatic and Chinese migratory movements. Yet, such a system of governance, rooted in its co-optation of local Chinese congregations and the continual expansion of surveillance technologies, operated in, as much as were limited and reshaped by, shifting historical moments that necessitate further exploration. Immigration surveillance, as a racialized bureaucratic practice, evolved from a tool of economic extraction deeply linked to the colonial political economy to a mechanism of political management deployed by a colonial state with constantly shifting priorities

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<sup>54</sup> Tax contributions ranked based on a system of patents were first enforced in the Decree of 15 January 1889. See « Le Ministre de la Marine et des Colonies a Le Président de la République Française, Décret réglementation la Contribution des Patentes en Cochinchine », 15 January 1889, GOUCOCH N1256, TTLTQGII-HCMC.

<sup>55</sup> J De Galember, Administrateur de 1<sup>re</sup> Classe des Services Civils de L'Indochine, Officier de L'Instruction Publique, *Les Administrations et les Services Publics Indochinois*, (Hà Nội : Imprimerie Mac-Dinh-Tu, 1924), p. 768.

to grapple with both internal and external resistance. The chapter will therefore further examine the French entanglement in a series of international treaties in the first half of the twentieth century as a key case study that embodied the crucial transformations in the colonial effort to control Chinese migration and Sino-French interactions writ large.

### ***Diaspora and Treaties: The 1935 Franco-Chinese Convention of Nanking***

In 1935, the French regime of capitation tax and infamous immigration control confronted a seismic rupture that brought their treatments of Chinese migrants in Indochina to international attention. In the aftermath of the Great War and the German handover of Shandong to imperial Japan as a result of the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, the Chinese Nationalist Party, then a member of the League of Nations, declared in the first GMD National Congress the abrogation of all existing unequal treaties as a priority in its political struggle. Deemed to be an essential path toward full sovereignty for the First Republic of China, this new nationalist discourse that cast a series of unequal treaties (*Bupingdeng Tiaoyue*) as the root causes of China's humiliation, promulgated by Dr. Sun Yat-Sen, rejected any semblance of imperial oppression in the forms of "foreign concessions, consular jurisdiction, foreign management of custom services, and all foreign political rights on China soil."<sup>56</sup> This critical moment led Chinese politicians to heed the ongoing situations in French Indochina where they argued that the colonial authority had not only one-sidedly benefitted from many free trade privileges but also built an exploitative state that mistreated Chinese migrants while subduing their status to "non-treaty citizens." The rising number of migrant residing in Cochinchina and their economic influence also warranted further protection from the Chinese state. Claiming to seek justice for over 500,000 Chinese living in

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<sup>56</sup> Dong Wang, "The Discourse of Unequal Treaties in Modern China," *Pacific Affairs* 76, no. 3 (2003): 399–425, pp. 406–407.

Vietnam at the time, China demanded a complete overhaul of the former Franco-Chinese agreements, first signed at the conclusion for the Sino-French War in 1885 as the Treaty of Tianjin, hence directing its political energy towards a new phase of intense renegotiations.<sup>57</sup>

The 1935 Franco-Chinese Convention of Nanking has been treated either as a series of treaties of pure commercial nature to sustain the colonial trade privileges in the specter of a rising Chinese nation-state or largely as an insignificant moment often mentioned in passing in the scholarship on colonial Indochina. A quintessential component of colonial and Chinese diasporic politics, this treaty, for the first time, foregrounded French colonial treatments of the Chinese migrant communities in Indochina by repudiating the ingrained unequal terms imposed earlier on Qing China by the French colonial government. The Republic of China through the texts of the Franco-Chinese convention challenged French laws with regards to three major principles: freedom of movement, taxation, and representation. Over the course of five years, persistent negotiations significantly reshaped Sino-French political relations and influenced the statuses of Chinese migrants in major Indochinese urban centers. Ultimately, the process culminated in a redefined category of “Chinese overseas nationals” and “privileged aliens” as a contesting political claim against the French construction of “*Asiatiques Etrangèr*.” The conclusion of the treaty thus contributed to the evolution of the colonial immigration-policing practices that had to continually adapt to a shifting international political landscape in port cities such as Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn where commercial exchanges and transnational mobility remained issues of great priority to the Chinese communities. While the French immigration continued to keep “dangerous” Chinese elements—secret societies, infiltrating revolutionaries, and subversive syndicates—at bay by escalating the poll tax rates and enforcing anthropometrical requirements, many of these efforts would soon be

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<sup>57</sup> Meng, C Y W, “The Sino-French Indochina Trade Accord,” *The China Weekly Review* (1923-1950), 3 August 1935, p. 334.

forced to undergo significant revisions as a growing Republican Chinese state contested the French colonial authority and influenced its policies. Offering forms of external protection to the Chinese in Vietnam so as to counter long-standing French discriminations was conceived as an effective strategy to lay claim to republican nationhood from a diasporic community while ascertaining Chinese rights to equality in the global stage.

Among a number of contentious issues raised on the table, the structure of the French surveillance regime designed to restrict Chinese mobility and their abusive taxation schemes preoccupied the agenda of Republican China's representatives as they pressure French authorities to modify what they saw as the two most oppressive measures targeting the Chinese communities. On September 1, 1928, Mr. Li Han-San, an overseas Chinese living in Sài Gòn, wrote a letter to Dr. C.T. Wang, the Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs, appealing for the importance of treaty revisions between China and French Indochina regarding this issue. First, he spotlighted the exorbitant transit dues collected by the French authorities on goods imported into or exported from Chinese territory, while passing through French territory, usually 20 percent, and requested assistance in having it abolished. Second, the identificatory regulation that mandated Chinese coming into or going out of French Indochina must bear a passport, he insisted, was not only an expensive measure to the Chinese people but also "entails too much difficulty to the people that should be done away with." Lastly, he attacked the long-standing excessive property taxes, which was discriminatory against the Chinese, and the inter-port taxes—introduced to restrict and control movements of Chinese in the French territory and thus "a humiliation to China as a nation"—should all be cancelled. The hope for fair treatment, this overseas Chinese proclaimed, could only be realized with more direct involvement from China, such as in the forms of official consular

representation in colonial cities, an issue that made a frequent comeback towards the end of negotiations.<sup>58</sup>

In February 1929, The ROC Chinese delegates, claiming to represent the interests of migrants in Indochina and advocating the overturn of existing legal regimes, fumed over French regulations that long targeted Chinese residents in Indochina and initiated legal contestations. A pundit in the *China Critic* described the French agreements as exploitative “bills of human bondage” as he furiously made the case for the revisions of unequal treaty terms when the Chinese in Indochina had long been suffering from ill treatments and enduring the humiliation inflicted upon them:

If the world were to remain permanently deaf to our appeal against injustice and, in some cases, inhumanity, we would have no more to say. But we cannot believe that the world could long remain indifferent to our claims to be treated like fellow human beings, since man’s inherent nature is good and since humanity and righteousness will always prevail in the end. Therefore, we will yet recover our full freedom and equality one of these days even without the reiterated profession of mutual friendship and goodwill between our own diplomats and the representatives of the powers who might further strengthen the existing sale-bills of our bondage! In other words, should the new treaty now being negotiated be shaped on old lines and fall short of our expectations, then better drop it and let it alone, as one of our ancients said, “better follow established rules than effect changes.”<sup>59</sup>

Chinese migrants’ indignation against French policies, as reflected in said overseas Chinese’s message, and the sense of national humiliation evoked here sprung out of Chinese officials’ contempt for the crippling financial hardship imposed upon migrants by the French authority through “reckless taxations,” including transit tax, per capita tax, house number tax, passport fee, travelling passages due, emigrating certificate fees. These, coupled with a stringent and dehumanizing process of medical examination, anthropometric measures, and penalization of

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<sup>58</sup> Kuo Wen, “Treatment in French Colonies Which Must Be Remedied,” *The North China Herald and Supreme Court & Consular Gazette (1870-1941)*, 1 September 1928.

<sup>59</sup> “A New Sino-French Commercial Treaty in Negotiation,” *The China Weekly Review (1923-1950)*, 9 February 1929.

transgressors, submitted Chinese to public embarrassments that were considered “outrageous to their dignity.”<sup>60</sup>

Prior to officially entering the negotiation, government officials from China made clear that the new treaty must be concluded, above all else, in accordance with the principle of securing China’s independence and security. “All clauses impairing our sovereign rights, hindering our economical [sic] development, or detrimental to the dignity and honor of our residents in Indochina,” they insisted, “should be rigidly excluded from the new treaty.” Additionally, they requested “all unfair and unequal practices, even extraneous to the treaty stipulations,” to be redressed and prevented from being introduced again in any forms in the revised treaty. On March 2, 1931, coming under diplomatic pressure, M. Paganon reported to the Chamber of Deputies of the budget and foreign affair departments, stressing the Chinese demand for commercial treaty negotiations and the necessity of the French government to live up to its republican principles:

Indochina ought to take serious precautions to prohibit trouble-makers from China from entering her territories. France, at the same time that she is drawing the attention of Nanking and of the responsible local Chinese authorities to the troubled state of the country and is also pressing for the settlement of incidents and reparation for damages sustained by those amenable to French jurisdiction, is forced to maintain with the Chinese people and Chinese government a policy of kind and cordial bearing inspired by her liberal traditions, and also conform to the important position which she occupies in the Far East.<sup>61</sup>

French changing attitudes in the midst of the treaty modification processes were certainly indicative of the weight of Chinese political voices. But they also demonstrated the utmost importance of China in the colonial state’s expansion endeavors where Chinese migrants in Indochina, now entangled in the web of diasporic diplomacy, played an undeniably crucial role in Franco-Chinese relations writ large. In fact, potential Chinese term reciprocations acted as important counterweights precisely because they provided what colonial authority then viewed,

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> “France in the Far East. Relations Between China and Indochina: New Agreement,” *The North China Herald and Supreme Court & Consular Gazette (1870-1941)*, 10 Mar 1931.



despite earlier resistance, as much-needed economic benefits that outweighed their political risks. This included, among others, the French rights to levy a special tax in exchange on Chinese residents who received special privileges in the colony and the enhanced mobility of French nationals who would be granted the rights to “reside, travel, and engage in industry or commerce” in specific Chinese localities.<sup>62</sup> As a result of Chinese criticisms and a gesture of diplomacy, the French did not entirely abandon the profitable capitation taxes, but reconfigured its terms to a category of “individual taxes levied on nationals of favored nations with special foreign privileges,” which seemed more agreeable to protesting Chinese and the ROC government.<sup>63</sup>

In addition to critiquing the exploitative taxation, the Nanking Convention also revised important terms pertaining to the statuses of Chinese migrants and their freedom of movements throughout the French colony. The Chinese Overseas Association of the Republic of China called to attention the absurdly complex bureaucratic entry requirements that the French authority imposed on migrants, especially how “the Chinese nationals entering French Indochina had to buy consular certificates and to affix their fingerprints, and had to observe various time limits, in addition to other inconveniences.”<sup>64</sup> French authorities adamantly resisted this accusation on the ground that protecting the colony from foreign menaces, effective taxation, and curbing the expansion of Chinese sphere of influence justified stringent immigration measures. In practice, colonial authority had long deployed its surveillance apparatus in the name of security to restrict Chinese entries and to bar Chinese political institutions from setting foot in Cochinchina.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> “Franco-Chinese Convention on Indochina is Published—Chief Points Summarized,” *The China Weekly Review* (1923-1950), July 27, 1935.

<sup>63</sup> « La Nouvelle Convention Franco-Chinoise Relative à L’Indochine, Correspondance Annexe Entre Les Plénipotentiaires, Propositions, Suggestions, et Modalités, » *L’Echo Annamite*, 8 August 1930. BNF.

<sup>64</sup> C.Y.W. Meng, “The Sino-French Indochina Trade Accord,” *The China Weekly Review* (1923-1950), 3 August 1935.

<sup>65</sup> « Convention & Dispositions Concernant la Société des Négociants et Commerçants Chinois en Cochinchine », GOUCOCH L.13 N5555. TTLTQG-II, HCMC.

Chinese representatives often refuted the French insistence, arguing that many of the colonial immigration regulations were racialized measures and specifically targeted Chinese people, hence promoting a form of racial discrimination that was unamenable to the inherently sovereign rights of the ROC. In so doing, they contended that the Chinese in Vietnam, as members of a sovereign nation-state, were thus entitled to the ROC's extraterritorial protection lawfully as "overseas nationals." The Chinese representatives approached this by vehemently criticizing the French discriminatory legal category that relegated Chinese migrants to the status of foreign Asians while subjecting them to inferior treatments compared to those accorded to the Americans, British, or Japanese nationals as members of the imperial nation-states. They thus demanded that the French reexamine their prejudices by modifying the existing immigration categories and their corresponding requirements.

In the end, as a reciprocal concession to the Chinese government's trade permission in major southern Chinese cities including Longzhou, Hekou, and Mengzi, the French revamped a host of identity-related requirements that dictated Chinese admission at embarkation ports and the outdated system of residence permits.<sup>66</sup> The system of traveling passes previously required of all Chinese immigrants were now abolished. As a distinct class of foreign nationals from a "favored nation," non-immigrant Chinese arriving in Indochina would be able to travel freely with an authorized passport and to participate in both commerce and industry. While the system of custom check that involved medical examinations and photographic certification remained, the French authority streamlined the identity-card procedure: a *laissez-passer* would now be effective for a longer duration of five years and with this card Chinese immigrants could enter any part of the

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<sup>66</sup> A. Maybon, « Les Négociations Sino-Indochinoises de Nankin, » *Revue du Pacifique*, 1929. BNF.

Indochinese Union without any additional documentation.<sup>67</sup> As one of the most important outcomes of this negotiation and a crucial compromise that the colonial state made, the French regime of migration was significantly challenged, leading to a revision of Chinese migrant classification, “a fifth class described in official nomenclature as ‘privileged aliens.’”<sup>68</sup>

Lastly, ROC Chinese representatives also fought for the principle of representation that would offer rapports for Chinese migrants in the forms of consular offices. The French newspapers *Le Temps*, in discussing the state of the Sino-French negotiations, indicated that the Nanking government demanded an immediate establishment of a Chinese consulate to represent 300,000 overseas Chinese currently residing in Indochina.<sup>69</sup> However, the French refused to accept such a request and argued that it had already reasonably reciprocated the Chinese government by offering custom right concessions. Unsurprisingly, the colonial regime’s opposition to the opening of Chinese consulates in Sài Gòn, Hà Nội, and Hải Phòng, as a core principle in the Franco-Chinese treaty, was largely political in nature and in line with their persisting concerns that such a clause would embolden Chinese migrants’ voices at the expense of French hegemony. The colonial authority, long sensitive to the prominence of Chinese networks and mobile connections, expressed fear that granting consular power would create a platform for Chinese reactionaries and thus in turn aid in the promulgation of anti-French propaganda in Indochina.<sup>70</sup> It did not help that one of the Manchu emperor’s effort to spy on anti-Qing revolutionaries in Vietnam by installing a

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<sup>67</sup> George Levasseur, “La Situation Juridique des Chinois en Indochine depuis les Accords de Nankin, » *La Revue Indochinoise Juridique et Economique* 3 (1937). BNF.

<sup>68</sup> Alain G. Marsot, *The Chinese Community in Vietnam under the French*, p. 117.

<sup>69</sup> ‘France and China,’ *Malaya Tribune*, 22 March 1929. Newspapers SG, NLB.

<sup>70</sup> “Sino-French Treaty Signed. Text Not Yet Available: Question of Extraterritoriality,” *The North China Herald and Supreme Court & Consular Gazette (1870-1941)*, 20 May 1930.

secret intelligence service was later uncovered by the French colonial police, hence sowing deeper distrust and resistance to consular establishments.<sup>71</sup>

Although sporadically interrupted with both governments' unwillingness to concede to terms that they deemed unequal, an official agreement on the finalized Franco-Chinese Convention on Indochina was drafted and ultimately published in both Nanking and Paris on July 21, 1935. At the core of it, this complex document stated that "the Chinese government may send consuls to Hà Nội or Hải Phòng, and to Sài Gòn, cities of French Indochina, and the French government may continue to send consuls to the localities mentioned in the preceding article." Not only did the Republic of China acquire the belated rights to establish consulates in Indochina, it also effectively pushed for fairer and more equal treatments of the Chinese migrant communities. The revised treaty affirmed the "favored nation status" of its overseas Chinese nationals in French Indochina.<sup>72</sup> On January, 1936, a new Chinese consulate at Sài Gòn was formally inaugurated on New Year's Day, according to information from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of China. It was reported that several hundred Chinese residents of Chợ Lớn were present at the ceremony to celebrate the occasion. This consulate was established in accordance with the Sino-French commercial treaty concluded between the Chinese and the French government in July 1935.<sup>73</sup> In 1948, the system of Chinese congregations in Indochina, long viewed by the ROC as an instrument of French repression of Chinese migrants, was officially dismantled as one of the final terms of the revised Treaty of Chongking and replaced by a new system called *Groupements Administratifs*

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<sup>71</sup> Lương Nhữ Kỳ, "The Chinese in Vietnam a Study of Vietnamese-Chinese Relations with Special Attention to the Period 1862-1961" PhD Dissertation, University of Michigan, 1962, p. 124-125.

<sup>72</sup> "Franco-Chinese Convention on Indochina Is Published—Chief Points Summarized," *The China Weekly Review* (1923-1950), 27 July 1935.

<sup>73</sup> "Chinese Consulate Opened at Sài Gòn," *The China Press* (1925-1938), 5 January 1936.

*Chinois Régionaux* (Chinese Regional Administrative Groups) through the decree of 18 September 1948.<sup>74</sup>

### **The Limits of Surveillance: Legal Ambiguities and Chinese Repertoires of Subversion**

This final section explores the multiple mechanisms in which Chinese migrants, deployed their existing mobile networks, fluid identities, and economic resources, to counteract colonial impositions and to exploit its legal structures. Chinese acts of subversion were not monolithic; they ran the gamut of quotidian resistance to political and legal manipulations that baffled the colonial authorities. This “repertoire” of subversive practices, the chapter argues, emerged in a dialogical relationship to the shifting power of the colonial state. Through negotiations, maneuvering, and everyday resistance, these repertoires evolved by adapting and responding to the colonial state’s imperatives while the latter was, in turn, reinvented to increase its surveillance capacity. A focus on Chinese subversion shows how the colonial construction of an elaborate immigration policing apparatus, despite its claim to hegemony, was by no means panoptic. In fact, French immigration officials often found it a herculean task to track down and arrest the Chinese since their “legal” identities were constantly in flux, malleable, and quickly shifting in response to colonial regulations.

Scholars of Chinese migration in Southeast Asia have long studied the complex and strategic nature of Chinese identity formations in colonial contexts. By examining closely how local modes of interactions between overseas Chinese networks reinforced the making of distinct Chinese identities and how ethnic self-identification was intricately linked to the deeply unequal and racialized structure of colonial law as well as to a history of political economy, they show that

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<sup>74</sup> Ramses Amer, “French Policies towards the Chinese in Vietnam, A Study of Migration and Colonial Responses,” *Recherche en Sciences Humaines sur L’Asie du Sud-Est* (16):2010, p. 17.

the construction of ethnic identities, or in this case what it meant to be Chinese, was a dialectical process wherein Chinese-ness were (re)articulated through political claims, negotiations, and contestations.<sup>75</sup>

In colonial Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn and Cochinchina at large, Chinese migrants, likewise, carefully reclaimed, maneuvered, and resisted colonially enforced ethnic categories and their regulations, thus exploiting the ambiguous judicial space between being subjects, foreigners, and citizens. As the colonial bureaucracy invented legal taxonomies that subjected Chinese migrants to new regimes of movements and fiscal obligations, they often failed to account for the leakages within these categories and generated a disjuncture between their legal enforcements and the process of self-identifications. These on-the-ground ambiguities reflecting colonial administrative confusion provided many Chinese with the opportunities to be creative in approaching their politico-legal statuses and responding to rules and regulations. This manifested most evidently in the case of the Minh Hương Chinese, a population of *métis* (mixed-race) Sino-Vietnamese that often challenged the French regime of ethnic compartmentalization and consequently exposed the limits of French surveillance.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the emergent need of the colonial state's development of an ethnic classification system to govern immigration law and issues of nationalities begged the question: who could be properly labeled as Minh Hương? It is conspicuous that, prior to the Franco-Chinese Convention of 1935, there were no clear-cut answers, which rendered the juridical statuses of the Minh Hương Chinese an utterly confusing business to the colonial authority. French

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<sup>75</sup> See for example, Mark Ravinder Frost, "Emporium in Imperio: Nanyang Networks and the Straits Chinese in Singapore, 1819-1914," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 36, no. 1 (2005): 29–66; Andrew R. Wilson, *Ambition and Identity: Chinese Merchant Elites in Colonial Manila, 1880-1916* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004); Richard T. Chu, *Chinese and Chinese Mestizos of Manila: Family, Identity, and Culture, 1860s-1930s* (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2010).

legal codes demonstrated at least three inconsistent manners in which a Chinese could be classified as Minh Hương. First, when the French captured Sài Gòn and colonization began to take root, while transforming Chinese congregations into French-legislated institutions, they simply honored the status of the Minh Hương Chinese as assimilated Vietnamese, a continuity from Minh Mạng assimilatory policies (*Giáo Hóa*), hence treating this community in all legal matters as “Annamite subjects” or French *protèges* with extra-judicial privileges. This approach was enforced in the original decree of 23 August 1871.<sup>76</sup> Second, for another period (1883-1930), anyone with a Chinese father who resided in Cochinchina regardless of birthplace could also register as Minh Hương. However, these Minh Hương Chinese were treated as foreign nationals and Chinese citizens subject to French immigration law and tax burden targeting non-French subjects.<sup>77</sup> And eventually, in 1933, before the conclusion of the Nanking Convention, Minh Hương legal identities evolved into three complex possibilities, which Ramses Amer succinctly captures:

Category one: The Minh Hương born and/or living in Cochinchina as well as their descendants, and the Minh Hương born after 28 September 1933 in the territories under direct French administration, i.e., the cities of Hà Nội, Hải Phòng, and Tourane [subjects of the French empire in Asia]

Category two: The Minh Hương born in Annam (except the city of Tourane), and the Minh Hương born in Tonkin before 1 July 1931 or after 8 November 1936 (except the cities of Hà Nội and Hải Phòng) [Persons under French protection]

Category three: The Minh Hương born in Cochinchina, in Hà Nội, in Hải Phòng, and in Tourane between 3 October 1883 and 24 September 1933 and the Minh Hương born in Tonkin between 1 July 1931 and 8 November 1936 [Foreign Chinese citizens or non-French subjects]<sup>78</sup>

What then were the implications of one’s adoption of Minh Hương identity, being legally considered as such, or disassociation from it? These certainly depended on the specific historical moments in which contingent social, economic, and political benefits, enabled by the loopholes of

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<sup>76</sup> Georges Levasseur, « Les Conflits de Lois et de Juridictions Intéressant les Chinois en Indochine, » *La Revue Indochinoise Juridique et Economique* 4 (1937), p. 57.

<sup>77</sup> « Le Gouverneur General de l’Indochine à Messieurs les Chefs d’ Administration Locale, Confidentiel Circulaire, » 14 August 1935, GOUCOCH F.73 N4848-01. TTLTQGII-HCMC.

<sup>78</sup> Ramses Amer, “French Policies towards the Chinese in Vietnam,” pp. 10-11.

French regulations, mapped out Chinese claims to their identities. And instances of Chinese strategic self-identification as they actively circumvented French legislations provided further insights to probe into this question.

In May 1935, the Governor of Cochinchina communicated to the Sài Gòn Mayor and the president of the Municipal Commission of Chợ Lớn about an urgent matter regarding the abundant controversies that the situation of the Sino-Annamite *métis* inflicted upon the authority. Over the course of a few years, provincial chiefs in Cochinchina reported a rising number of cases in which many Chinese, seeking to dodge obligatory military conscription as required in conformity with the 1874 decree treating the Chinese as assimilated subjects, pretended to be non-indigenous and assumed a “false” Chinese identity. With information supplied by the Immigration Service, custom police discovered a frequent practice that they called “sham departure”: a Chinese would organize a short trip to China and present themselves on their return with a fraudulent Chinese name, and to claim a fictitious date and place of birth. Since there was no official law regulating civil status for emigrants in China, the Immigration Service could not request corroborating documents and could simply register their declarations of status. To be sure, under these circumstances, by declaring themselves as foreign Asians, the Chinese had to submit to hefty capitation taxes, higher than that of the Vietnamese. However, according to a Chinese “pretender”, “this inconvenience appears to be slight, especially in time of prosperity, in view of the advantages offered by the membership of a Chinese congregation.”<sup>79</sup> The opposite was also true; when businesses went down and capitation tax became an unmanageable burden, to escape from this tax duty and avoid

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<sup>79</sup> « Le Gouverneur de la Cochinchine a le Maire de la Ville de Sài Gòn et a le Président de la Commission Municipale de Chợ Lớn, » May 1935, GOUCOCH F.73 N4848-03, *Note au Sujet des Minh Hương*. TTLTQG-II, HCMC.



a deportation order, reclaiming the Minh Hương identity as fully assimilated French subjects was undeniably useful.

Perhaps, a noteworthy legal struggle that brought the issue of Chinese identities and their implications for colonial regulations under public scrutiny was the case of Trần Tôn against Public Ministry, a one-year legal battle fought in the Sài Gòn court in 1933. A 35-year-old Minh Hương Chinese trader in Sóc Trăng and the son of the late Trần Phụ and a Vietnamese mother, Dương Thị Chu, Trần Tôn was persecuted by the Court of Appeal of Sài Gòn and called on trial for two charges of embezzlement of public funds on December 17, 1929 and for breaching an deportation order later on November 24, 1932.<sup>80</sup> On April 1928, a rumor began to spread in Sóc Trăng province that Mr. Trần Tôn, a candidate running for reelection as the chief of the Teochew congregation, had a catastrophic financial history and was therefore unfit for the position. Despite the circulation of hearsays that questioned Trần Tôn's background and character, he received unyielding support from the past presidents of the congregation and the Chợ Lớn Chamber of Commerce leaders who testified to the colonial council about his credibility as the son of a honorable Chinese family running a successful grocery chain and silk trade business.<sup>81</sup>

However, in response to the spreading allegations and the preliminary election vote counts that wielded in favor of Trần Tôn, the colonial municipal commission sent a Chinese agent, Tao Trạch, to come down and investigate the situation. In October 1928, this agent filed a report to the administrator of Sóc Trăng, revealing that Trần was indeed insolvent. Supplied with further information from the security service, the report indicated that Trần had borrowed a 12,000-piastre

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<sup>80</sup> « Trần Tôn Contre Ministère Public. Arrêté Contradictoire Confirmatif, » GOUCOCH F.73 N4848-04, TTLTQG-II, HCMC.

<sup>81</sup> « Le Président Sortant de la Chambre de Commerce Chinois à Monsieur le président de la Commission Municipale de Chợ Lớn, » 26 May 1918, GOUCOCH F.77 N32624, *Dossier Relatif à la Situation Financière du M. Trần Tôn, Chef de la Congrégation de Triều Châu de Sóc Trăng, Année 1928*. TTLTQG-II, HCMC.

mortgage for one of his businesses with an outstanding debt of 6000 piastres. Additionally, he owed the head of the Rạch Giá township 18,000 piastres for a purchase of paddy. As a trader with a third-class license and a 95-ton junk, Trần's poor financial management ultimately cost him the election. But what really handed him to the colonial immigration police and inquisitive auditors was the mysterious disappearance of 137,080 piastres in the Teochew congregation's budget. In that same year, it turned out that the Teochew congregation did not fulfill its 1926 and 1927 tax payments.<sup>82</sup> Multiple sources and investigations pointed to the fact that Trần Tôn had stolen the money to offset his debts and save himself from bankruptcy. That his father had served one term as the president of this congregation also did not help his cause and only raised much deeper suspicion from the police.

On October 8, 1928, the provincial head issued an official arrest warrant to Trần Tôn for embezzlement of public funds and a first-order expulsion for failure to uphold public service. Confronted with staggering debts, a disqualified election, and an indictment for corruption, Trần Tôn ran away five days before the warrant arrived and was since nowhere to be found.<sup>83</sup> Five years later, he reappeared in the French records, only this time at the Sài Gòn court and with another added conviction of non-compliance with immigration law, resulting in a second deportation order. Notes from the Court of Appeals revealed that he had attempted to leave Cochinchina and come back to erase his past records and declare a different civil status, from foreign national as previously declared when he first landed in Sài Gòn from Fujian to now French subject. On being captured in Sài Gòn in 1934, he hired a lawyer, M. Limet, who argued in court on his behalf that Trần Tôn qualified for the status of French subject and his departure from the colony did not violate

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<sup>82</sup> « M. L'Administrateur de la Province de Sóc Trăng à Monsieur le Gouverneur de la Cochinchine, Confidentiel » 31 March 1928, GOUCOCH F.77 N32624, TTLTQG-II, HCMC.

<sup>83</sup> « M. L'Administrateur de la Province de Sóc Trăng à Monsieur le Gouverneur de la Cochinchine, » 8 October 1928, GOUCOCH F.77 N32624, TTLTQG-II, HCMC.

his claim to this legal identity, rendering the deportation order null and unlawful. The judges at the criminal court refused to concede to the lawyer's argument and while unable to declare his attempt to fix the civil status a delinquency, convicted him of infraction of a previous expulsion order by "penetrating again into the interior of the French territory from which he had been requested to leave."<sup>84</sup> Even though Trần lost the legal battle and was eventually expelled, what mattered was that the outcome of this court case, especially amidst the heat of the Franco-Chinese Convention of Nanking negotiations and the pressure from Republican China, shaped a new legal precedent for the Chinese claims to Minh Hương identities and colonial regulations in the effort to suppress what they perceived as "Chinese malpractices." At long last, throughout multiple public hearings and taking advantage of this legal precedent, colonial judges enforced a new statutory date legislation in colonial law, non-retroactive in nature, seeking to tighten and restrict the windows in which Chinese could make claim to new identities. The Governor-General of Cochinchina announced this important legislative changes in 1935 as follows:

Directors and heads of provinces, it happens all too frequently that foreign Asians declare in Sài Gòn to be Chinese nationals. Some of them pay each year the amount of tax until they reach the age of twenty-three and then, having escaped the conscription, produce documents of civil status stating that their mother is Annamite... This practice, very widespread, is the origin of a very important prejudice for our public finance and I hereby have the honor to inform you of an important decision made on September 1934 by the Court of Appeal.

Chinese, born on August 18, 1900, who came of age on August 18, 1921 and were Minh Hương (Sino-Vietnamese *métis*) in accordance with the decree of 3 October 1883 and the indigenous legislation could claim French subjecthood only before the year that follows on August 18, 1922. If, for any legal reasons, the Chinese failed to declare this status, he would continue to be treated as Chinese nationals until he managed to fulfill this formality before 1927. This will be the last necessary year to make a declaration, after which the only legal manner in which French citizenship could be acquired is through naturalization.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> « Trần Tôn Contre Ministère Public. Reçoit Comme Régulier l'Appel Forme par le Prévenu Trần Tôn, » GOUCOCH F.73 N4848-04, TTLTQG-II, HCMC.

<sup>85</sup> « Sài Gòn, Note Postale, Gouverneur Cochinchine a Tous Administrateurs, Chefs de Province, » GOUCOCH F.73 N4848-04. TTLTQG-II, HCMC.

Apart from grappling with the legal implications of the Minh Hường Chinese, on a day-to-day basis, the French immigration control struggled with collecting commercial dues and business taxes, and demanding submission of business warrants from this community. The French colonial agents set out, on multiple occasions, to track down and arrest subversive Chinese who refused to follow orders. Instances of Chinese micro-aggression and reported attempt to subvert the French immigration check protocols pervaded the colonial records and surfaced when French officials happened to catch them in the act. This transpired in various forms, from using fake identities to exit Cochinchina without a pass to maintaining forms of ambiguous identities to evade tax payments.

On August 21, 1896, a second-class immigration officer and acting Brigadier of the Immigration Police, M. Castellini, turned in a 23-year-old Chinese named Mach-Quac to the authority and indicted him with a charge of illegal embarkation for failure to carry a verifiable passport and produce statutory documents to corroborate residence status. This report, filed with the Immigration Office, indicated that Mach-Quac succeeded at deceiving the ship captain, M. Voss, by wearing a blue chauffeur suit he borrowed from an acquaintance, a driver named A. Phuc, and then proceeded onboard in this disguise. Multiple charges were immediately issued not only to Mach-Quac but also to the unfortunate captain who remained liable to a fine of 300 to 800 francs for “not following protocols and negligence in the verification of passengers” as stimulated in the decree of 25 April 1895.<sup>86</sup> In the aftermath of the Nanking Convention when the French government was forced to undergo a short-lived phase of deregulation to demonstrate its commitment to the treaty, the head of immigration reported to the Governor-General an uptick in “extremely mobile and bad-faith Chinese coolies” who entered Cochinchina from other countries

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<sup>86</sup> “Castellini, Agent de 2e Classe Faisant Fonctions de Brigadier de la Police de l’Immigration, » GOUCOCH F.77 N10619, 21 August 1896. TTLTQG-II, HCMC.

to claim extraterritorial protection in the Union after the regime of fingerprint was momentarily suppressed. When arrested and inquired about paperwork to determine their tax situations and potential debts, these Chinese, as congregation chiefs complained, “declared with confidence that they lost their paperwork during transit but had paid their taxes, statements that could not be controlled and were impossible to verify without any trusted means.”<sup>87</sup>

On other occasions, Chinese residents refused to declare their true identities and the nature of their businesses to resist what they regarded as the government’s unjust policies. The case of the Chinese pork butchers and dealers, for example, as the two most notorious groups among colonial auditors as frequent tax evaders and potential subjects of expulsion, was illuminating. When the Chợ Lớn Mayor intensified the policing measures to crack down on the Chinese monopoly of the meat market share by giving a platform to Annamese tradesmen and collecting further dues from Chinese establishments, a riot broke out as a response to colonial regulations. *The North China Herald* reported on the incident, indicating that despite a vigorous intervention by the police, a Sino-Annamite feud escalated while no proper arrests had been made since the Chinese, “lost in the impersonality which characterizes them, were speedily lost in the swarming mass of their countrymen and could not be re-found.” After a Vietnamese agent of the colonial police was allegedly assassinated by an unknown Chinese, the reporter issued a warning to the public that reflected the ways in which many Chinese in Cochinchina resisted the system of residence permits with attached photographs:

We have several times already drawn attention to the danger resulting to the public peace of this agglomeration of people without personality, whose names, professions and residences change each instant according to the needs of the moment; whom no one, even in the police, can flatter themselves to be able to discover if their companions think well to cause them to disappear or if they choose to lose themselves in the mass of the floating population. When

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<sup>87</sup> « Le Gouverneur de la Cochinchine à Monsieur le Gouverneur General de l’Indochine, » May 1936, GOUCOCH F.73 N4848-02. TTLTQG-II, HCMC.

then, will it be decided to take serious measures to assure the identification and surveillance of these individuals?<sup>88</sup>

If the underprivileged Chinese drew on a limited range of everyday resources available at hand and engage in common tactics theorized by James Scott as “weapon of the weak” to subvert their oppressors, their upper-class compatriots employed a different array of strategies.<sup>89</sup> As transnational actors themselves, Chinese merchant elites’ flexible identities were deeply embedded in the operations of their commercial networks and relations, and often linked to the benefits accorded with choices of citizenship at distinct moments. The practice enabled powerful Chinese, often maritime capitalists, to move and transition smoothly between different colonial jurisdictions with their flexible claims to citizenship and to European immigration regimes. The concept of “flexible citizenship” developed in the scholarship of Aihwa Ong has served as a noted theoretical roadmap to help explicate the *modus operandi* of contemporary Chinese transnationalism in the age of globalization and neoliberal capitalism.<sup>90</sup> However, it could also serve as a useful framework to make sense of Chinese strategic migratory practices in the case of Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn wherein the colonial economy was buttressed by a long history of diasporic Chinese capitalism and the state budget heavily dependent on revenue generated from Chinese business assemblages. Long-standing cultural and economic networks provided Chinese merchant elites with inventive pathways to defy conventional forms of citizenship and legalities, often enabling them to circumvent colonial regulations and to harness existing mobility to establish “ungrounded empires” in multiple colonies.<sup>91</sup> French officials made cautious remarks from early on, drawing public

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<sup>88</sup> “The Character of the Chinese in Sài Gòn,” *The North China Herald and Supreme Court & Consular Gazette*, June 15, 1880.

<sup>89</sup> James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2000).

<sup>90</sup> Ong, *Flexible Citizenship*.

<sup>91</sup> Aihwa Ong and Donald Macon Nonini, *Ungrounded Empires: The Cultural Politics of Modern Chinese Transnationalism* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

attention to Chinese “playful” proclivity to “possess their fortunes in business elsewhere and disappear without a trace when facing the most perilous phases of their careers, leaving Europeans to struggle with liabilities.”<sup>92</sup>

Naturalized French citizenship, largely granted to a selected number of prominent foreign Asians (*Asiatiques Etrangers*), was oftentimes a controversial matter that divided French public opinion. The category itself also functioned as a powerful tool to be frequently exploited by Chinese merchant elites. The newspaper *Le Mekong*, for example, brought the issue to light and went on a tirade against what it characterized as the extremely doubtful nature of such expedient political category:

We understand perfectly that the quality of French citizen should be accorded to a foreigner who by services rendered to the French cause, or by philanthropic works will have shown himself worthy of that privilege. But to go beyond that and prostitute our naturalization in giving it to the first-comer under pretexts more or less obscure, and often under the sole pretext that he has well-lined pocket—the thing can be seen in Cochinchina—to go from that, we say, to the decorating with the title of French persons whom their own race-fellows profoundly despise there is a great abyss.<sup>93</sup>

Beyond targeting Chinese economic success and criticizing their commercial predominance, French colonists advocated here a new line of critique centered on wealthy Chinese as unassimilable subjects and consequently political threats. As explored in Chapter 1, French pervasive fear of Chinese rice merchants’ competitive edges against European trading houses induced tariff manipulations and new regulatory ordinances to control them. While economic imperatives certainly dictated colonial attempts to start interfering in the commercial playing field, French insecurity about Chinese mobility added another layer to the colonial will to enforce surveillance.

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<sup>92</sup> “Les Chinois en Indochine,” *La Revue Economique de Extrême-Orient*, 5 Septembre, 1927. BNF.

<sup>93</sup> “A Propos of Naturalization,” *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertise (Weekly)*, 10 August 1899, NL1958, NewspaperSG, NLB.

In 1899, it finally came to the attention of French authority in Cochinchina that a good number of influential traders in Chợ Lớn had obtained naturalized French citizenship. However, these big traders, as a reported indicated, were not only French citizens, but also Dutch and British subjects. Colonial officials long faced the challenge of pinning down Chinese identities in their quest to centralize control and monitor the movements of its subjects. Complaints about the colonial inability to devise effective financial schemes in order to properly tax these “cunning and mobile” merchants had been recurrent since the heyday of the trans-regional rice trade boom when the colonial authority desperately forced the Chinese to implement book-keeping in French and submit their information to the French Chamber of Commerce.<sup>94</sup> To no avail, such surveillance methods posed little impact on existing Chinese commercial strategies intentionally invented to subvert regulations. Headstrong critics of naturalized citizenship dwelled on Chinese strategies in their appeal:

Their [Chinese] game is a simple one. They have three different names, one after the usage of each of the three countries of adoption. And so relying on the gullible-ness [sic] of the European administration, in a French dependency they define themselves as English or Dutch subjects and vice versa: constantly threatening the public authorities of the colonies in which they dwelt with the Consul of a friendly nation.<sup>95</sup>

In fact, alteration of names, or flexible uses of multiple aliases was one of the most frequent strategies employed by Chinese merchants, traders, and capitalists that consistently befuddled the colonial authority and served as the major detractions to the colonial administration. In order to impose the correct amounts of tax duties on resident migrants for the colonial state to balance the colonial budget, the authority had to know exactly who they were taxing, how much income that Chinese-owned firms made over the years, how long they had been operating in Cochinchina, and

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<sup>94</sup> « Au Sujet de l'application du Code de Commerce Française aux Commerçants Chinois (1875), » GOUCOCH L.0 N1256, TTLTQG-II, HCMC. See also the first chapter of this dissertation.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.



whether these merchants had run other businesses that generated significant enough revenues and hence subjected to the state's scrutiny of their accounting ledgers. Chinese identities thus established the foundation for legal subjecthood and provided the framework for colonial immigration to interpret and enact different provisions upon those subjected to the state's stringent policies.

Take the pertinent case of the Straits Baba Chinese's connections to Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn as an example. As early as in the 1850s, Singaporean-born Chinese businessmen, perhaps most prominently the three Tan brothers, Tan Keng Sing 陳慶星, Tan Keng Hoon 陳慶雲, and Tan Keng Ho 陳慶和, had run an essential large-scale timber trade in the province of Gia Định. With the consolidation of the French colonial state and policies that stimulated the commercialization of rice and opened up new avenues for economic expansion, Tan Keng Ho directed his investment to the rice trade business while his older brother Tan Keng Hoon began to participate in the profitable opium trade.<sup>96</sup> As I elaborated in chapter 2, in the 1860s and 1870s, a Cochinchina-based opium revenue syndicate emerged in direct competition with the market in Hong Kong, marked by a new partnership between the Tan brothers and another Straits-born Chinese, the notorious "Ban-Hap."<sup>97</sup> Although much of the early colonial economic foundation in the region was organized by Chinese merchants from Singapore, their identities, however, were evidently far from rooted in the localities of Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn. The Tan brothers, for instance, purchased and invested in high-value properties including factories and opium farms in Sài Gòn while simultaneously declaring themselves as British rather than French subjects. This move afforded them much better economic treatments and the ability to bypass the discriminations regularly directed at their fellow immigrant

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<sup>96</sup> Claudine Salmon, "On the Track of the Straits Baba Diaspora: Li Qinghui and His 'Summary Account of a Trip to the East' (1889)," *Chinese Southern Diaspora Studies*, Volume 5, 2011-12, p. 122.

<sup>97</sup> Carl A. Trocki, "Revenue Farming and the Chinese Economy of Colonial Southeast Asia," in Geoff Wade & James K. Chin ed., *China and Southeast Asia: Historical Interactions*, (New York: Routledge, 2019), p. 309.

Chinese. As a matter of fact, the French government officially employed the family syndicate and categorize it as a chief government contractor in 1873 despite their status as foreigners or *immigrants Chinoises*. Their company, Tan Keng Sing & Co, Storekeepers, Quai de Commerce, was listed as a French-patronized business in the official colonial directory.<sup>98</sup>

As such, it is illuminating that Strait-born Chinese merchants in Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn preserved multiple aliases and maintained a range of shifting legal and business affiliations to their advantages, a practice viewed by French colonists as shady, clandestine, and subversive when they tried to keep Chinese networks and activities in check. The opium revenue farm contractor, known by his trade chop among French colonial officials as “Ban-Hap,” for example, possessed a few distinctive identities throughout his career: Gan Wee Tin that signified his Straits origin in the Nanyang commercial networks; “Ban-Hap” or Vạn Hòa in Cochinchina, which later became the opium company namesake; Ngan Chan Wai as in the Cantonese dialect; and the Sino-Vietnamese transliteration Nhan Vĩ Thiên.<sup>99</sup> Contrary to the Tan brothers who were Sino-British subjects under French jurisdiction, Ban-Hap, now also known as Bin Siu Hap in the French records, acquired permanent residency and received French patronage after 13 years of living in the colony. Such choice was, to be sure, intricately linked to the timely legal and economic benefits associated with the expansive growth of the state-sanctioned opium revenue farms, evidenced in his letter to the Gouverneur General of Cochinchina that expressed his gratitude for the “perks” of French citizenship, including lower patent taxes and financial incentives, in the event of his retirement as

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<sup>98</sup> See entry under “Sài Gòn,” in *The Chronicle & Directory for China, Japan, & The Philippines*, (Hong Kong: The Daily Press Office, 1873), p. 362.

<sup>99</sup> Nguyễn Đức Hiệp, *Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn, Ký ức Đô Thị và Con Người* [Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn, Memories of Its Urban Landscape and Peoples], (TP Hồ Chí Minh: Nhà Xuất Bản Văn Hóa Văn Nghệ, 2018).

the chief of the Teochew congregation in 1872.<sup>100</sup> There is perhaps no better example of the enormous advantages of French protection offered to Chinese business tycoons who served under the French flag as naturalized citizens than the famed bail-out of the Cochinchinese opium syndicate led by Ban-Hap in 1874. To ensure the survival of an essentially “too big to fail” business that would result in a mass trickle-down of bankruptcies in Chợ Lớn, the colonial state saved the enterprise, then exhausted by debts and inability to offset its operating expenses, by “renegotiating Ban-Hap’s terms of payment and granting it the liquor farm as an additional source of revenue.”<sup>101</sup>

Lastly, the legal and commercial practice of using alternate identities was just as popular in the circles of Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn’s rice traders. As mentioned in a previous chapter, the rice tycoon Quách Đàm, a Hokkien Chinese from Fujian, operated a branch of his major rice firm Thông Hiệp (*Société Anonyme Thong Hup Nguyễn Seng*) in British Singapore with an alias rendered after the Peranakan-Hokkien homophone Kwek Siew Tee (or shortened as Kwek Tam).<sup>102</sup> French administrators, from the early days of colonization, often found Chinese “poor” standard legal transparency and record-keeping both a sign of backwardness and sly behaviors. Their negative reactions to the fluid nature of Chinese identities partly reflected the underlying rationales that motivated the colonial enforcement of new regulations: constantly changing names made it harder for the existing authority to effectively identify the individuals as well as their business relations and trans-regional connections, which rendered taxation and seeking financial accountability a persistent conundrum to the colonial state.

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<sup>100</sup> Letter from Bin Siu Hap (Ban-Hap) to the Gouverneur General of Cochinchina, GOUCOCH C.92 N36481, *Dossier Individuel de M. Siu Bin Hap, Chef des Congrégations de Canton de Trieu-Chau à Sài Gòn*, Année 1872. TTLTQG-II, HCMC.

<sup>101</sup> Gerard Sasges, “Scaling the Commanding Heights: The Colonial Conglomerates and the Changing Political Economy of French Indochina,” *Modern Asian Studies* 49, no. 5 (September 2015): 1485–1525, p. 1497.

<sup>102</sup> Notice, *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, April 24, 1923. NL1663. NewspaperSG, NLB.

Finding Chinese behaviors obstructive, the French revamped their surveillance mechanisms, requiring the standardization of Chinese names and a record convention in vernacular Vietnamese within legal documents submitted to the state. In 1912, for instance, the French Vice Consul in Amoy complained to Governor General Albert Sarraut about a recurring administrative nuisance in identifying Chinese names because they were presented in official legal state documents in Romanized Vietnamese (*quốc ngữ*) but recorded in Chinese characters in other venues. “The Chinese established in Indochina,” he lamented, “are known to the administration or to the French justice only by names which, in their countries, are absolutely unknown and consequently make it impossible to research or immediately identify them if they have business in their country of origin.”<sup>103</sup> The fact that Sino-Vietnamese names were also often widely used among mixed communities such as those in the Minh Hương Xã added another layer of complexity to existing colonial administrative problems, constituting a perpetual challenge to the colonial regime.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter demonstrates how the colonial regulations targeting Chinese mobility in French Cochinchina, especially in port cities as Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn, were justified by indispensably linked economic and political imperatives central to the proper functioning of colonial rule. The French government constructed its immigration regime first upon the foundation of elite collaborations both as a continuation of the existing regulatory patterns from the Nguyễn imperial assimilation policies and later as its own legislative innovations through closely working with Chinese congregations and their leaders. The top-down bureaucratic structure of Chinese congregations and the French effort to integrate this system into the colonial surveillance apparatus

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<sup>103</sup> Barrett, *The Chinese Diaspora in Southeast Asia*, p. 176.

enabled French administrators to monitor Chinese movements and financial activities and to ostensibly exert punitive power over those who transgressed the colonial order.

Capitation taxes and innovative measures to manage a transnational community that relied on an elaborate and sophisticated organization of a central immigration bureau, which issued residence permits and identity documents, performs anthropometric functions, and policed border, constituted the crux of the colonial immigration regime and defined Franco-Chinese relations. As much as these developments were colonial initiatives, the chapter shows that they were also adaptive responses to evolving Chinese threats, which not only reflected the agility and flexible nature of the Chinese communities, but also the inherent contradictions of the colonial project that rendered major reorientations and structural changes inevitable. It would have been theoretically impossible, for example, to understand, without critically examining the intertwining political and economic logics that underlay the colonial mindset, how and why a colonial state, deeply concerned about the legitimacy of the civilizing mission, resisted ameliorative tax reform in the middle of unceasing opposition from a community it often sought to pacify while developing a full-fledged immigration bureaucracy that imposed more stringent policing measures. Not only were bureaucratic innovations necessary, but they were also critical to a reconciliation of the irony of colonial rule: the Chinese had always been an ambivalent force in colonial politics, both as a threat to be tamed and a boon to a bustling colonial economy that demanded a joined taskforce of an indispensable class of powerful middlemen and exploitative labor.

International politics and the complicated status of Chinese migrants in a changing world of rising sovereign states that shifted the attention to its “overseas nationals” as a means to confront imperialism also deeply influenced the structure of the French immigration control. As demonstrated in the case of the Franco-Chinese Convention of Nanking in 1935, the Republic of

China succeeded at refuting the French's insistence on China's unequal status among sovereign nations by questioning the legality of the colonial treatments of Chinese migrants in Indochina. To preserve its imperial interests in China and maintain its sphere of influence in East Asia, French colonists conceded to the ROC's demands regarding the freedom of movements, release from Indochina oppressive taxation, and consular representation granted to the migrant communities. This historical moment was certainly monumental to diasporic Chinese politics, but it also represented a new phase of Chinese settlement in colonial Vietnam both as "privileged aliens" under the French tutelage, which would continue to offer them many economic rights and benefits, and as ROC nationals with extra-territorial protections. Such intersection of Chinese nationalist and colonialist identities would later complicate the politics of Chinese presence in Vietnamese nationalist debates in the midst of the First Indochina War.

Chinese resistance to the French immigration regime was an equally important story in the larger narrative of Franco-Chinese interactions and colonial governance. A reaction to the structural injustice of French policies designed to shift the burden of taxation and immigration bureaucracies on Chinese immigrants, Chinese subversive practices, either by the rich or the poor, exploited the modality of their own transnational networks and quotidian resources to avert colonial regulations. Tax evaders deployed strategies most readily available to them to escape from the reach of auditors and immigration police: from using fake identities to exit from the colony to refusal to declare their true identities and maintain book-keeping method in Chinese as opposed to French. Chinese merchant elites, with interests in preserving the colonial connections beneficial to their political rights and prosperity in the colony, maintained a perplexing system of aliases as forms of flexible citizenship to navigate the oppressive structure of control from which their less fortunate compatriots were often unable to escape. In analyzing the colonial reactions to these

strategies, the chapter concludes by affirming the dialogical nature of Chinese resistance and French drive to perfect its regime of surveillance, ultimately demonstrating it to be a constitutive feature that shaped colonial policies and Franco-Chinese interactions.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **To Learn, Live, and Die: Chinese Education, Hospitals, and Death Management in Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn**

*“A city is a place where people can learn to live with strangers, to enter into the experiences and interests of unfamiliar lives. Sameness stultifies the mind; diversity stimulates and expands it. The city can allow people to develop a richer, more complex sense of themselves. They are not just bankers or road sweepers, Afro-Caribbeans or Anglo-Saxons, speakers of English or Spanish, bourgeois or proletarian; they can be some or all of these things, and more. They are not subject to a fixed scheme of identity . . . That is the power of strangeness: freedom from arbitrary definition and identification.”*

—Richard Sennett, “New Capitalism, New Isolation, A Flexible City of Strangers.”

*“Internal urban colonization did not develop in a linear fashion. It affected and involved different groups of the urbanized population at different times and in different ways; nor did it develop mechanically and one-sidedly. It grew through a simultaneous dialogue between the city and the people, from the specific challenges of the urban environment to its inhabitants’ abilities of appropriately reacting to it—their reactions and their behavior in turn influenced and even shaped the colonial and postcolonial urban environment. The history of the colonial metropolis thus shows how the experience of urbanization, with its heterogeneity and inherent contradictions, opened up new spaces of freedom and pluralism.”<sup>1</sup>*

—Philippe Peycam.

### **Transnational Communities in a Colonial Urban Space**

In a commemorative reflection of interwar Sài Gòn, writer David Lan Phạm recalls his childhood growing up in a colonial city with many faces. As “the largest, most populous, and splendid city in South Vietnam,” the metropolis was dotted with grand European-style embellishments: “palaces, churches, villas, new streets, and office buildings” intentionally

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<sup>1</sup> Philippe Peycam, “From the Social to the Political: 1920s Colonial Sài Gòn as a ‘Space of Possibilities’ in Vietnamese Consciousness,” *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 21, no. 3 (September 15, 2013): 496–546, p. 496.



constructed to exude the grandeur of Parisian architecture. The city remained an eclectic hodgepodge of cultures and ethnicities, but it did not take long for one to notice how “all expensive and comfortable villas, houses, apartments, and commercial buildings belonged to the French, Chinese, and Hindus.” The facades of urban wealth and luxurious consumptions could not also conceal the “poor residential quarters scattered throughout Sài Gòn” where impecunious migrant workers, Chinese and Vietnamese alike, tolerated sub-par living conditions and forms of exploitation to subsist and survive day by day.<sup>2</sup>

Colonial cities were domains of connections and differentiations that embodied the contradictions of modernity. By the late nineteenth-century, French global imperialism, incentivized by its modernizing imperatives, and Chinese transnational capitalism together transformed colonial Sài Gòn and its adjacent city of Chợ Lớn into a complex tapestry of social, economic, and political interactions. Proponents of Eurocentric urban theories tend to explain the heterogeneous feature of global cities and segregated spaces along ethno-racial and class line in terms of a “dual-city” and “sharp bipolarity” perspectives between the “rich and the poor” as well as “the marginalized and the dominators.” However, Asian cities—Sài Gòn, Hong Kong, Penang, or Singapore—as global colonial spaces with a mutually shared multi-ethnic character exhibited a significant divergence from this bifurcated model. As sociologist Robbie Goh insists, the strong presence of local traditions and particularities, even in the face of European domination, governed urban interactions and “interacted with general forces of economic and infrastructural modernization.”<sup>3</sup> In Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn, the existence of influential Chinese communities with their transnational connections, cultural practices, and modalities of political involvement presented a

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<sup>2</sup> David Lan Phạm, *Two Hamlets in Nam Bộ: Memoirs of Life in Vietnam* (North Carolina & London: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2000), pp. 66-108.

<sup>3</sup> Robbie B. H. Goh, *Contour of Culture: Space and Social Difference in Singapore* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2005), pp. 2-5.

similar challenge to French colonists, engaging them in a set of dialectical processes that questions the inefficient binary of celebrated heterogeneities and marked segregation.

When Su Lin Lewis elaborates on the shared patterns of urbanization in colonial Penang, Bangkok, and Rangoon, she remarks how despite the fact that ethnic segregation was a staple phenomenon that defined colonial urban society, the rigid lines between European colonists and the cities' multi-ethnic inhabitants became more and more indeterminate in the emergence of a powerful middle and elite upper class whose financial capital, cultural creativity, and political activism began to intercept the monopoly of European modernity.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, a closer examination of Chinese experiences revealed the colonial city to be a space of capacious creativity with a multitude of possibilities for power negotiation or subversion, encapsulated in Michel de Certeau's conception of "polytheism of scattered practices," one that looked beyond the strict demarcation of "authority and subversion" to explore contingent and crisscrossing social and political relations under colonial rule.<sup>5</sup>

Likewise, in southern Vietnam, the rise of a class of Francophile Vietnamese and urban nationalists who demanded access to colonial parliamentary politics and inserted their voices into French system of governance had set this process into motion and constituted a conundrum for colonial authorities.<sup>6</sup> Affluent Chinese elites who were leaders in the rice and shipping industries and prominent personalities within their communities also made a mark onto this theater of colonial politics, attempting not only to work out a negotiable set of initiatives essential for

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<sup>4</sup> Su Lin Lewis, *Cities in Motion: Urban Life and Cosmopolitanism in Southeast Asia, 1920-1940*, Asian Connections (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 49.

<sup>5</sup> Michael de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> Peycam, "From the Social to the Political."

community-building but also to protect their interests in the name of peaceful co-existence and survival.

In such environment laden with potential conflicts, negotiations, and compromises, three key domains mattered to Chinese quests for survivals and community development: education, healthcare, and funerary managements. This chapter thus discusses these prominent avenues in which imperatives for community-building, shaped by Chinese interactions and negotiations with the French authority, would often run counter to the ideologies and practices of a modernizing colonial state. This constituted the hallmark of inter-ethnic relations that rendered “modernity” as a product of Chinese political activism as much as their coterminous entanglement with a repressive colonial state yearning for social control and political order in Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn. As the colonial city and its urban population evolved with increasing mobility and global contact, French colonial governance remained susceptible to external threats and influences, brought together by Chinese diasporic connections and interconnected trans-imperial networks. The chapter first moves from inside the classrooms of a Franco-Chinese High School where Chinese educational desires intersected with the grandiose French colonial ambitions to train a new generation of loyal, competent, and politically assimilated intermediaries. It then draws attention to Chinese congregations’ social and cultural initiatives by exploring the contested politics of death, hygiene and public health, and welfare management. Going beyond the confined framework of resistance and domination, this chapter locates the presence of the Chinese communities at the heart of colonial politics and treats the making of colonial Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn as the outcome of what geographer David Harvey theorizes as “the dialectics of the city,” which highlights the

multiplicity of discourses and social processes rooted in the dynamism of Chinese diasporic political agencies and social engagements.<sup>7</sup>

### **To Learn: “Hybrid Modernity” and a Franco-Chinese High School in Colonial Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn**

On September 12, 1940, *the China Critic* (*Zhongguo Pingluan Zhoubao* 中國評論周報), a Sino-British periodical published in extraterritorial Shanghai, featured an eye-catching column by reporter Huang Pin with the headline “The South Sea Chinese and Their Problems.” In it, Huang evoked visceral imageries of the China’s war of resistance against Japanese invasion and the humiliation of semi-colonialism to mobilize nationalistic sentiments, and brought those critical moments of national exigency to bear on the duties of five millions overseas Chinese residing in the Nanyang. Warning his readers of the waning patriotism of South Sea Chinese, Huang diagnosed this problem as the result of intensifying colonial repression in Chinese respective settlements and “inter-marriages with the natives”. While these seemed to remain two distinctive political aspects, Huang characterized them as symptoms of the same issue: the uprooting of Chinese culture due to local assimilation and the “slave education forced upon them by the colonial governments.” Political in tone and published in an overtly anti-imperial and China-centered publication, Huang Pin’s writing nevertheless zoomed in on a touchy and complicated topic among the Chinese diaspora: the education of Chinese migrants in colonial Southeast Asia. His emphasis on textbooks, teacher training, and school administrations suggested the centrality of Chinese education not only to the political agenda of the Republican Chinese government in Southeast Asia

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<sup>7</sup> David Harvey, “Contested Cities: Social Process and Spatial Form,” in Nick Jewson and Susanne Macgregor eds., *Transforming Cities: Contested Governance and New Spatial Divisions*, (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 19-27.

but also to the livelihood of its “overseas compatriots” during the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>8</sup>

In Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn, education too remained a crucial area of concern to a growing Chinese community, which soon emerged as an intricately entangled local and international matter. Earlier in the nineteenth century, well before French colonization of Cochinchina, Chinese communities that settled in urban Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn were predominantly junk traders and merchants with a sizable stream of laborers that arrived later as part of the global influx of Chinese coolies initiated by British free trade imperialism in southern China. Education for Chinese communities around this early period was not a priority to either the French colonial state or Chinese leaders. While the former was then preoccupied with transforming native (Vietnamese) education in the framework of the civilizing mission, the latter relegated Chinese education—teaching children to speak and write Chinese and other subjects—to the private domain of the home.<sup>9</sup> Wealthy merchants could afford this form of “house education” by hiring learned men as private tutors or qualified instructors for their children and relatives. Communal learning, or institutionalized Chinese education, emerged as a product of twentieth-century colonial and international politics that reoriented local community initiatives and defined inter-ethnic interactions.<sup>10</sup>

Locally, attention to the education of Chinese youth was not only noted by community leaders who now insisted on the importance of the perpetuation of the Chinese languages and

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<sup>8</sup> Huang Pin (James Hwang), “The South Sea Chinese and Their Problems,” *The China Critic* 中國評論周報, September 12, 1940. *The China Critic* was inaugurated in Shanghai in May 1928 and its publication cycle spanned the Nanjing Decade (1927-1937) with intermittent issues published into the 1940s. The periodical served as a rare and important Chinese-owned English-language forum for open political expression from Chinese perspectives and as a contentious yet cosmopolitan outlet for public intellectuals to oppose imperialism. See William Sima, “Re-Introducing the *China Critic*,” China Heritage Project, the Australian National University.

<sup>9</sup> Gail P. Kelly, “Colonial Schools in Vietnam, 1918 to 1938,” *Proceedings of the Meeting of the French Colonial Historical Society* 2 (1977): 96–106.

<sup>10</sup> Lương Nhữ Kỳ, “The Chinese in Vietnam: A Study of Vietnamese-Chinese Relations with Special Attention to the Period 1862-1961” PhD Dissertation, University of Michigan: 1962, p. 169.

culture, but also by French colonists who constantly wrestled with the inescapable Vietnamese and Chinese demand for educational provisions as a tenet of living up to the *mission civilisatrice*. The rising prominence of an urban Chinese merchant elite class, coupled with the intensified bureaucratization of the colonial governing structure and the emergence of class differentiations as a by-product of French “divide and rule” policy, contributed to a growing demand for Chợ Lớn-based educational institutions.<sup>11</sup> On the one hand, such Franco-Chinese schools would ideally attract Chinese youths to the French language and culture while allowing Chinese-ness to exist within the liminal framework of colonial ideology and minimizing “undesirable” ties with mainland China. On the other hand, Franco-Chinese education, as it provided Chinese students access to the French material and cultural world as a gateway to social status and wealth, was envisioned as a training ground for generations of apolitical, cosmopolitan Chinese fluent in both the French and Chinese languages, who remained loyal to the French empire and far removed from Chinese nationalism.<sup>12</sup> French drive to establish Chinese schools was therefore not only to accommodate rising educational needs of a growing population of young Chinese students, but also to respond to the gravity of transnational Chinese politics sweeping through Chinese communities in Vietnam. Wealthy *négociants Chinoises*, especially naturalized French citizens, found education of their children an essential tool to sustain a lineage of sociocultural capital and to climb to higher social and political ladders, a familiar feature of ethnic Chinese survival

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<sup>11</sup> Trần Khánh, *The Ethnic Chinese and Economic Development in Vietnam* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Indochina Unit, 1993). p. 28.

<sup>12</sup> Philippe M. F. Peycam, *The Birth of Vietnamese Political Journalism: Sài Gòn, 1916-1930* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012). Peycam discussed how, tied to intense urbanization in Sài Gòn and the emergence of a bourgeois middle class, French colonial bureaucracy introduced new demand for competent, well-trained technocrats and the process of social distinctions due to differentiated access to colonial education. See Chapter I, “Social Order in the Colonial City,” pp. 13-33.

strategies and identity formations that also existed elsewhere in the Straits Settlements or colonial Indonesia.<sup>13</sup>

Even in light of its politico-historical significance, Chinese education as a research topic has received scant scholarly attention in Vietnam studies. Research on colonial education in French Indochina has concentrated its energy on the evolving Franco-indigenous educational projects, debating the assimilatory and “hegemonic imposition” effects of colonial schooling on Indochinese youth.<sup>14</sup> Recent interest in the Chinese communities in French colonial Vietnam has led to more available, albeit scattered, information on Chinese schooling during the colonial period. These works view the establishment of Chinese schools largely as a mechanism of cultural gatekeeping and identity preservation in the context of navigating colonial hegemony and maintaining Chinese community bonds.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> As indicated in chapter 1 of this dissertation, a majority of wealthy Chinese merchants in Indochina had been naturalized French citizens and forged effective alliances with the colonial government well by the 1930. For a recent work on British Malaya, see Karen M. Teoh, *Schooling Diaspora: Women, Education, and the Overseas Chinese in British Malaya and Singapore, 1850s-1960s*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018); For an overview of Chinese education in Indonesia, see Leo Suryadinata, “Indonesian Chinese Education: Past and Present,” *Indonesia* 14 (October 1972): 49-71.

<sup>14</sup> At the core of this debate remains the question of whether colonial education had an assimilatory effect on colonized Vietnamese, commonly referred to as the “transforming native into Frenchmen” trope, or that French education, far from assimilation, sought to impose French knowledge and language on the native so that they came to recognize the superiority of French culture vis-à-vis indigenous traditions. On the colonial education debates, see Kelly, “Colonial Schools in Vietnam, 1918 to 1938”; Marie-Paule Ha, “From ‘Nos Ancêtres, Les Gaulois’ to ‘Leur Culture Ancestrale’: Symbolic Violence and the Politics of Colonial Schooling in Indochina,” *French Colonial History* 3 (2003): 101–17.

<sup>15</sup> For example, Tracy Barrett, analyzing the functions of Chinese congregations and French interactions, ascribes the proliferation of Chinese schools in Indochina in the early decades of the twentieth-century to congregational leaders’ desire to “encourage multidirectional ties between the colonies and the native place.” As such, Barrett asserts the vitality of Chinese education in Indochina both as a nexus of Sino-French interaction and as “a bulwark, a primary line of defense for the preservation of native place identity and culture in a strange, if not so distant, land.” See Barrett, *The Chinese Diaspora in Southeast Asia*. pp. 126-146. Mok Mei-Feng’s recent study further suggests that Chinese education during the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) period, while still maintaining such cultural imperatives, remained largely a Chinese monopoly without much colonial intervention from the outset. See Mok Mei-Feng, *Negotiating Community and Nation in Chợ Lớn: Nation-Building, Community-Building and Transnationalism in Everyday Life during the Republic of Việt Nam, 1955-1975*, PhD Dissertation, (University of Washington: 2016).

An in-depth exploration of the *Lycée Franco-Chinois* (Franco-Chinese High school or *Trung Học Pháp-Hoa* in Vietnamese), an archetype of Franco-Chinese collaboration in the realm of secondary education and arguably Indochina's most long-lasting French-patronized school, reveals new facets of Chinese identities and Franco-Chinese relations beyond a China-centered model that often defined existing knowledge about Chinese education in colonial Vietnam. By situating the emergence and institutionalization of this Chinese high school in the intertwined global and local contexts of China's revolutionary politics, French colonial rule, and deeply entangled Franco-Chinese interactions, I highlight a hybrid model, a product of Franco-Chinese elite collaborationism, that shaped this under-studied aspect of Chinese relations to the colonial regime.

The establishment of the *Lycée Franco-Chinois* killed two birds with one stone. It first enabled French colonists to compete with the growing international influences of the revolutionary fermentation now radiating outwards from China. And it then functioned as a colonial mechanism to cope with the internal political instability arising as a consequence of increasing Chinese mobility in the colony while striving to meet the demands of well-to-do Chinese elites whose social and economic successes were inextricably tied to colonial capitalism.

Mei-Feng Mok accurately observes that the state of Chinese education in the RVN (1955-1975) was a major departure from its precedents of comparatively less stringent colonial regulation. This key difference, however, emerged only in the context of the Ngô Đình Diệm regime's hostile forced citizenship policy in 1955, which required Chinese migrants in southern Vietnam to either give up ties to China or to be barred from major occupations in Chợ Lớn.<sup>16</sup> Chinese education,

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<sup>16</sup> Ramses Amer, *The Ethnic Chinese in Vietnam and Sino-Vietnamese Relations*. (Kuala Lumpur: Forum, 1991). Forced citizenship law introduced in 1955 stated that "all children born out of mixed marriages between Chinese and Vietnamese persons were considered to be Vietnamese citizens. All Chinese born in Vietnam were to



thus, as Mok analyzes, was a “battle for the minds” between a consolidating nation-state trying to penetrate and govern its citizens’ social life and a prominent ethnic community navigating changes introduced by a new political regime.<sup>17</sup> In contrast, I argue that collaboration with Chinese capitalists during the colonial period was central to the governing imperatives of the French colonial authority. Chinese education, rather than simply “shouldered by Chinese communities,” manifested as an essential domain of colonial state and ethnic Chinese *synergy*. The indispensability of Chinese merchants as influential power brokers and economic intermediaries demanded a different set of political priorities from French colonists and their attention to Chinese educational needs. Instead of overt suppression and hegemonic regulations, the colonial state allowed a hybrid, bilingual model of Chinese schooling to operate and thrive.

As much as educating Chinese youth, in the framework of perpetuating Chinese knowledge and language, remained critical, exposing them to the French cultural world and imparting to young Chinese practical Western knowledge as part and parcel of a shifting urban, cosmopolitan lives was equally significant, if not obligatory, to both Chinese communities and the French authority. To capture the nature of such relationship, I use the term “hybrid modernity,” inspired by Peter Post’s and May Ling Thio’s groundbreaking study of the Kwee family in Ciledug, a Peranakan elite family who opted to educate their children in both the Dutch and Chinese languages as a strategies of survival and upward social mobility, to describe a condition of cultural duality acting side by side that reinforced a hybrid sense of self and belonging crucial to explain

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automatically become Vietnamese citizens” and all non-Vietnamese were to be banned from eleven specified occupations. These included “fishmonger and butcher; retailer of product in common use (chap-pho); coal and firewood merchants; dealer in petroleum products; second-hand dealer; textile and silk merchants handling less than 10,000 meters; metal scrap dealer; cereal dealer; transporter of persons and merchandise by surface vehicle or boat; rice millers or processors; commission agencies.” pp. 11-19.

<sup>17</sup> Mei-Feng Mok, *Negotiating Community and Nation in Chợ Lớn*, pp. 64-102.

the complex formation of Chinese identities in the European colonial settings.<sup>18</sup> In colonial Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn, Chinese education, in short, mattered a great deal to French colonists as a tool of political control and pacification to stave off undesirable external “nationalistic” and anti-imperial elements while simultaneously ensuring a sustainable and mutually beneficial relationship with influential Chinese merchant elites. Colonialism, the outreach of Chinese nationalism and revolutionary fervor in Southeast Asia, and local community initiatives came together to shape Chinese education in southern Vietnam.

To explore this entanglement, I first situate Chinese education in Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn in broader transnational forces of overseas Chinese educational modernization in the Nanyang. I do so to demonstrate how French colonial engagement with Chinese communities in Vietnam over educational matters transpired upon the backdrop of trans-regional inter-Asian politics shaped by late-Qing self-strengthening reforms, the 1911 Chinese Revolution, and the May Fourth Movements as global historical moments. French and Chinese periodicals provide a glimpse into the colonial rationales and motivations of this Sino-French collaborative project, exemplified by the importance of *Lycée Franco-Chinois* as one of the most long-standing Sino-French institutions in modern Vietnam. This ambitious political project that aspired to cultivate “the best of both world”—Francophile and Sinophile—Chinese subjects who remained useful to the colonial state, although fraught with financial instability and political obstacles throughout its existence, illuminated well the limitations of “native tie” as a framework of diasporic identity formations and a critical reexamination of inter-ethnic co-existence in the contexts of Chinese trans-local connections and French colonial power.

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<sup>18</sup> Peter Post and May Ling Thio, *The Kwee Family of Ciledug: Family, Status and Modernity in Colonial Java, Visualising the Private Life of the Peranakan Chinese Sugar Elites*, (Volendam: LM Publishers, 2019).

### *Colonial Southeast Asia, Chinese Nationalism, and Impacts on Education*

The establishment of modern Chinese schools in Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn was not an isolated phenomenon. Rather, it was an integrative component of larger global historical movements with roots in shifting imperial and nationalist politics in China and key transformations in colonial governance in Southeast Asia. Despite the fact that early Chinese education had a nineteenth-century precedent in central Chinese settlements in British Malaya and the Dutch East Indies, one of the earliest momentous episodes of political change that catapulted the proliferation of Chinese schools across the Nanyang began with the Qing Dynasty's Hundred Days Reform that emerged from 1898 in response to a series of humiliating defeats by Western imperialism. A departure from a previously conservative attitudes towards maritime commerce and migration, the Qing dynasty directed its reformist energy to the overseas Chinese communities in Southeast Asia: it established an education bureau (*Xuebu* 學部) in 1905 and sent influential self-strengthening modernizers, such as Zhang Bishi and Liu Shiji, to the Nanyang to set up Chinese schools and promote modern education.<sup>19</sup> In colonial Singapore, as Lim Guan Hock points out, Chinese schools mushroomed during this period as a result and prominent Chinese community leaders, including Dr. Lim Boon Keng and Khoo Seok Wan, enthusiastically embraced the movement, by encouraging schools to adopt the curricula and Confucian-oriented teaching administered by the *Xuebu*.<sup>20</sup>

The Qing's royalist educational reform initiatives were to be met with a concurrently budding revolutionary movement led by Dr. Sun Yat-Sen, the so-called "father" of modern Chinese nation in the Nanyang. As the Qing's self-strengthening vision of maintaining national unity while

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<sup>19</sup> Chia Oai Peng, "Chinese Education in Southeast Asia," in Tan Chee-Beng, *Routledge Handbook of the Chinese Diaspora* (London; New York: Routledge, 2013). p. 450.

<sup>20</sup> Lim Guan Hok, "Development of Chinese Education in Singapore (1819-1979)," in Chong Guan Kwa, Mulin Ke, et al., *A General History of the Chinese in Singapore* (Singapore: Singapore Federation of Chinese Clan Associations : World Scientific, 2019). pp. 425-426.

learning from the West espoused by Zhang Zhidong sought to ward off anti-Manchu sentiments in the diaspora, mobilization for a nationalist revolution remained in the offing and exerted its competing influences over Chinese political orientations in Southeast Asia at large. Such political momentum made its reach to French Indochina as early as in 1900 when Sun Yat-Sen, according to historian Alain Marsot, was invited to the 1902 Hà Nội Exposition and attempted to garner financial and political support from the local Chinese immigrant communities. Sun Yat-Sen's subsequent arrival in Tonkin in 1903 and significant presence in Sài Gòn to organize a central revolutionary organization with the assistance of Chợ Lớn's Chinese inspired the teaching of his "Three People Principles 三民主義" across the newly established private schools that were springing up over the colony. French records thus characterized his political mobilization of local Chinese communities as a major source of agitation. The French colonial authority, then itself divided between the imperial expansionist faction and the pro-Qing diplomats, remained ambivalent toward Sun's anti-Manchuism, at times facilitating his preparation of multiple frontier uprisings while persistently alarmed by "the potential dangers represented by a modernized China on Vietnam's frontier."<sup>21</sup> Sun's cosmopolitan background, complex travel histories, and multiple contacts with imperial Japan, America, and Britain exacerbated French paranoia, inducing the colonial bureaucracy to heed and neutralize any perceived political threats through any China-linked networks that involved Chinese migrants in Vietnam.

It is a well-known fact that Sun's revolutionary project relied on a concrete financial foundation to materialize and ideological influences through educational reforms had to tap into the enormous wealth and resources provided by prominent overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia. Unsurprisingly, in addition to networking with secret societies for local leverage and clandestine

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<sup>21</sup> Marsot, *The Chinese Community in Vietnam under the French*. p. 45.

operations, Sun's nationalist ambitions received considerable support from overseas Chinese merchants, businessmen, and traders—the same people who by now became critical advocates of educational reforms for Chinese communities and actively engage in the modernization process of Chinese schools in Southeast Asian colonies. For comparison, in colonial Singapore, another predominantly Chinese society and central nexus of the Nanyang revolutionary network, Chinese business tycoon Tan Kah Kee, also known as British Malaya “rubber king,” famously made the case for building and modernizing Chinese schools by linking the imperatives of providing Chinese youth a good education to the lofty patriotic mission of saving China from backwardness and imperialism (*Jiaoyu Jiuguo* 教育救國).<sup>22</sup> Influenced by Tan's initiatives, self-awareness of China's changing place in the world, and Chinese nationalism, many wealthy Chinese merchants recognized the importance of Chinese migrants' education, supported Sun's nationalist causes, and invested heavily in the construction of secondary institutions and universities. These included, for example, Tan Lark Sye, the founder of Nanyang University; the “king of sugar” in Java, Oei Tiong Ham (Huang Zhongshan); the Hokkien Zeng Jiangshui in Malacca and the Singaporean Teochew, Lim Ngee Soon.<sup>23</sup> In colonial Vietnam, the Chinese merchant elites contributed “more than a million taels to Sun Yat-Sen's cause, and that he had great sway over the educated classes, who helped spread his teaching.”<sup>24</sup> While many of these wealthy Chinese in Vietnam were to eventually turn away from Sun's movement due to the fact that they perceived its close connections to notorious members of the Triad and former “Black Flag” brigades such as Wang Ho-Shun and

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<sup>22</sup> Yan Qinghuang, “Hokkien Immigrant Society and Modern Chinese Education in British Malaya, 1904-1941,” in Yan Qinghuang, *The Ethnic Chinese in East and Southeast Asia: Business, Culture, and Politics* (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 2002). p. 206.

<sup>23</sup> Yan Qinghuang, “Hokkien Immigrant Society and Modern Chinese Education in British Malaya, 1904-1941,” pp. 212-213.

<sup>24</sup> Marsot, *The Chinese Community in Vietnam under the French*. p. 45.

Huang Ming-Tang to be too radical and violent, it is clear that their financial capital and moral support were crucial to the earlier stage of Sun's influence in Indochina.<sup>25</sup>

The increasingly penetrating force and energetic presence of anti-Qing Chinese revolutionaries in colonial Vietnam, coupled with intelligence reports of unrests with links to local Chinese secret societies and the Sun Yat-Sen-led Tung Meng Hui, led to the French anxieties about their ability to control a large Chinese population in Indochina. French colonial awareness of external political forces affecting Indochina, such as flexible networks of Chinese revolutionaries, the specter of a rising Japanese empire with its eyes long set on China, and spread of Chinese nationalism through unregulated circulations of politically charged materials, had already resulted in earlier preemptive efforts to diffuse any ideological threats that would undermine French imperial sphere of influence. This included the creation of the first private, institutionalized, and French-funded Chinese school, the Ecole Pavie in Hà Nội in 1904. This institution, dominated by children of Qing officials from Yunnan, served French colonial political interests as a proxy of diplomatic negotiations with the Qing imperial court and competition with the popularity of British schools in Canton and Hong Kong. This short-lived school, however, spun out of French control and transformed itself into a heated battleground of student-led political activism. Its students, who, ironically trained in the French language, sciences, and politics, turned to contest French intrusive colonial policies in the Sino-Vietnamese borderland by distributing anti-French political pamphlets and waging public demonstrations. Elitist and political in nature, the school did not attract many children from wealthy local Chinese merchants, who, as opposed to those southern Chinese mandarins, remained on a quite different side of the political equation with French colonists. By July 1908, plagued by "reactionary" political activities and an outburst of anti-French

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<sup>25</sup> Jeffrey G. Barlow, *Sun Yat-Sen and the French, 1900-1908*, China Research Monograph, no. 14 (Berkeley: Center for Chinese Studies, Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 1979). pp. 39-40.

atmosphere, the Ecole Pavie had been considered to be a dead weight to the colonial administration, which then, within a short time period, declared the school's permanent closure by that same year.<sup>26</sup>

In the aftermath of the 1911 revolution when the Qing dynasty was overthrown and China entered into a transitional period of political infighting known as “warlord-ism”, the French regime effectively banned the introduction, circulation, and sale and distribution of Chinese newspapers and periodical publications in all Chinese dialects over the course of a few years wherein exceptions could only be made with colonial authorization.<sup>27</sup> Such prohibitory move reflected the influential reach of the revolution in Vietnam and the political significance of Chinese communities there to French colonial governance. The success of the revolution and the emergence of a new Chinese republic also meant that the Chinese in Vietnam and elsewhere in Southeast Asia were now watching events in China unfolding with greater interest and enthusiasm than ever. The republican Chinese government carried on the legacies of Sun Yat-Sen's engagement with overseas Chinese networks in Southeast Asia by taking advantage of the patriotic waves engulfing the diaspora and by endowing scholarship funds reserved for children of overseas Chinese merchants.<sup>28</sup> It established the Overseas Chinese Affairs Bureau in 1927, which began to pass regulatory laws regarding Chinese diasporic investments, labor, and diplomacy and to oversee Chinese migrants' schools abroad.<sup>29</sup> On the ground, Chinese education initiatives in Vietnam and the Nanyang also followed closely this political transformation, evidenced by the vernacularization

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<sup>26</sup> Jean Baptiste Paul Beau, *Situation de l'Indochine de 1902 à 1907*, (impr. M. Rey [Sài Gòn] : 1908), 322. For detail of the political events leading to the official dismantling of this school, see Tracy C. Barrett, *The Chinese Diaspora in South-East Asia: The Overseas Chinese in Indo-China*, (London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2012). pp. 131-138.

<sup>27</sup> “News from Indochina,” *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 29 January 1916. NewspaperSG, NLB.

<sup>28</sup> “Overseas Chinese: Random notes,” *The Shanghai Times* (1914-1921), Feb 8, 1917.

<sup>29</sup> Zhuang Guotu, “China's Policies on Chinese Overseas, Past and Present,” in Tan, *Routledge Handbook of the Chinese Diaspora*. p. 35.

of the language of instruction from Chinese dialects (baihua 百花) to modern Mandarin (Guoyu 國語). As Fang Wei, a representative deployed to Southeast Asia in 1937 by the Ministry of Education and the Overseas Chinese Affairs Commission to investigate the state of Chinese education there, later reported, Mandarin was widely taught among the 162 overseas Chinese schools he visited and surveyed.<sup>30</sup>

It is perhaps by no means a mere coincidence that Sun Yat-Sen's expulsion from Indochina to British Singapore in January 1908 for being a subversive element was soon followed by the synchronous establishment of another Sino-French school in Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn, the Lycée Franco-Chinois, a few short months later. This school, while representing French colonial recurring attempts at educating Chinese children in the colony as an instrument of pacification after its dramatic failure in 1904, was born in a fraught theater of transnational politics and proliferation of anti-imperial activities. Existing Chinese networks of migration and patterns of trans-local interactions gradually exposed the overseas Chinese in Vietnam to different strands of nationalist orientations while the Chinese revolution—its mobilization, successful appeals to Chinese migrants, and languages of democratic liberation—continued to haunt French colonial rule. Colonial hyper-sensitivity to these factors, wherein Chinese migrants configured prominently in the unfolding of political events, would be intensified by an oft-forgotten fact that Indochina was in many ways viewed as a necessary staging ground for an expansionist global empire to develop unlimited access to greater China and its abundant market of trade and resources. Since the eve of colonial annexation, French encounter of a crucial population of Chinese traders in southern Vietnam had meant that colonial policies, including education, could not discount the political reality of Chinese migrants' essential roles in enabling empire to realize its grandiose objectives.

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<sup>30</sup> "Mandarin Gaining Favor with Chinese South Seas Schools," *The China Press* (1925-1938), Jan 15, 1937.



Quite different from the Ecole Pavie in Tonkin that was conceived merely as a hegemonic colonial institution, the Lycée Franco-Chinois in Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn emerged as product of Sino-French collaboration, operating on Chinese funds with French political support. This educational project, as shall soon be revealed, was the second French attempt to train Francophile Chinese to advance its economic goals and strategic reorientation of colonial policies to undercut outside nationalist influences in the colony and to grapple with larger shifting currents of imperial politics in Asia. On the side of wealthy Chinese elites, collaborating with the French regime was also a carefully calculated choice. A close examination of which through situating the Chinese in Vietnam in the larger orbit of East Asian politics and the Nanyang migration networks as I argue reflected the limitations of a China-centered “native tie” model of analyzing Chinese involvement in local institutions and politics. A deeper look at the Franco-Chinese school shall further illuminate the life of this institution, its mutually enforcing political imperatives and ideological foundations, and thus its importance in a more layered understanding of Sino-French relations in southern Vietnam.

***Lycée Franco-Chinois: A Case of State-Society Synergy and the Politics of Sino-French Collaboration***

*Ideological Foundation and Establishment: French Imperial Dreams of Loyal Chinese Subjects*

Upon the backdrop of French imperial interests in China and the phenomenon of long-distance Chinese nationalism that Rebecca Karl characterizes as “the deterritorialization of Chinese politics”<sup>31</sup> gripping Southeast Asia at the turn of the twentieth century, the French regime recalibrated its political approach to managing the Chinese communities in Indochina by engaging them in their ongoing educational civilizing mission. At this juncture, education was undoubtedly

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<sup>31</sup> Rebecca E. Karl, *Staging the World: Chinese Nationalism at the Turn of the Twentieth Century*, Asia-Pacific (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).

viewed as an effective politico-cultural measure to counteract unwanted threats and to appropriately configure what I call an efficacious mode of co-existence and interactions with Chinese merchant elites. It must be emphasized here that earlier effort to reorient French policies from the failure of direct rule and interventionist monopoly to a more indigenous-oriented and “humane” approaches had already been promoted by Governor-General Paul Beau whose tenure lasted from 1902 to 1908.

Paul Beau, known as a colonial moderate who maintained a positive view of Chinese intermediaries in the colony and highly valued their contributions, was often acknowledged to be the founder of an extensive Franco-indigenous school system, the reformer of the mandarinat, and the liberalizer of penal reform in Indochina.<sup>32</sup> Having also founded the Indochinese University in 1906, Paul Beau left a legacy of modern education that trained a generation of young upper, middle-class Vietnamese students, distanced from pre-existing Sino-Vietnamese education, who were now taught vernacular Vietnamese (Quốc Ngữ), French, and a wide range of humanistic and scientific subjects. Much of this undertaking that predated Governor Albert Sarraut’s Franco-Vietnamese Collaboration Policy starting in 1911 was largely overshadowed by metropolitan criticisms of the Indochinese regime for the violent occurrence of the 1908 anti-colonial machination to poison the French armies in Hà Nội and its ruthless executions of political prisoners involved in the assassination plot.<sup>33</sup> What has often been forgotten about Paul Beau’s reform was his earlier recognition of the equal importance of French roles in providing education to young Chinese and foreign Asians at large, alongside with the development of the *Ecoles Franco-*

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<sup>32</sup> Goscha, *Vietnam*.

<sup>33</sup> This event, often referred to in official historiography as the Hà Nội Poison Plot, was led by the anti-colonial nationalists Phan Bội Châu and Đề Thám. The poorly coordinated poisoning attempt of French colonial troops ended up affecting and killing 200 artillery and infantry soldiers, leading to the French authority to declare martial law and to execute suspicious accomplices. See David G. Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism, 1885-1925* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971). pp. 193-196.

*Indigène* system. He drew attention to the fact that Chinese private schools had been left to their own devices, making Chinese children vulnerable to non-French ideas and perpetuating the “antiquated” classical Chinese education that only strengthened their ties to China.<sup>34</sup> Before his retirement in the event of the 1908 uprising, the Lycée Franco-Chinois was arguably Paul Beau’s final project to espouse his vision of expanding and sustaining French influence in Asia.

As a result, the establishment of a Franco-Chinese High school in Chợ Lớn was ideologically motivated by the French persistent desire to grapple with several key evolving phases of transnational politics they viewed to be the potential disruptors to colonial rule in Indochina. First, the French regime conceived this project to be a necessary pursuit not only in the development of Franco-Vietnamese collaboration (Pháp Việt Đề Huề) but also in competing with the emerging spheres of political influences in East Asia, namely Republican China and Japan. In 1923, the then-director of the Franco-Chinese High school, Commandant Robert, publicized a series of at-length discussion in defense of continuing support for Franco-Chinese education wherein the Lycée Franco-Chinois, as he contended, remained at the heart of the imperial endeavor. He expressed utter disappointment in the lack of knowledge retention among Chinese students who studied abroad in Paris, Lyon, Nice, or Marseille as a consequence of the government’s lackluster effort to cultivate a bi-directional relations with this population, leading them to “return to China equipped with the French language without any considerable benefits for us.” Robert furthered his argument by pointing out the danger of this educational model, suggesting that young Chinese students, imbued with French knowledge, would soon enter into trading relations with other European and American houses and leave behind any meaningful connections with their “French masters.”

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<sup>34</sup> Jean Baptiste Paul Beau, *Situation de l’Indochine de 1902 à 1907*. Tome 2. 1908. BNF. « Enseignement de Franco-Chinois ». BNF. p. 322.

Attributing this ongoing problem to French ignorance of the roles of Chinese education in advancing its global imperial interests and an unwillingness to leap through the cultural barriers to acknowledge the significance of Chinese commercial partnership, he substantiated his points by recalling a story that happened to him in 1905. A younger Robert was traveling on a French steamship from Marseille to Sài Gòn and, as he embarked in Singapore to continue the trip, encountered a wealthy Chinese next to him. The Chinese man was strongly impressed by Robert's fluency in Mandarin despite his struggling communication in the Fujian and Teo-chew dialects; a friendship blossomed, Robert recalled, in the mutual exchanges of knowledge and appreciation. Four years later, he returned to Singapore only to observe the improved quick pace in which his businesses, far removed from any non-essential bureaucracies, got taken care of. Robert soon realized that the influential Chinese merchant whom he conversed with onboard by chance years ago had ordered a Chinese employee of the Maritime Mail Service to facilitate his travel without notice by checking his name on the passenger list. Utilizing this personal example to highlight abundant opportunities to advance French interests by working with, rather than ignoring or underestimating, Chinese merchants by means of knowledge reciprocation, he exclaimed:

We must facilitate the Chinese's acquisition of our language as an essential vehicle of our influence via our sciences, our literature, and our trade. If we want China, now too eager to learn and stimulated by the example of a modernizing Japan, to turn to us, the Chinese must be able to understand us. If we want our press to be read and circulated in Chinese circles, the Chinese must be proficient in our language. If we want the catalogues and advertisements of our trading houses to leafed through in China, rather than those of our rivals [referring to British and American trade houses], we have to develop competent understandings of their cultures and have them speak our languages. All of which is fundamental common sense.<sup>35</sup>

Additionally, Robert emphasized the “loyal nature” of the Chinese once they were treated with respect and equality, citing his encounter as a representative instance of “the type of concessions

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<sup>35</sup> Commandant Robert, Directeur du Lycée Franco-Chinois, « L'Enseignement Franco-Chinois, » *La Revue Du Pacifique*/ Directeur : Leon Archimbaud, Députe. 1923-07.

could be made when one acts in the impulses of sympathy and cherish personal relationships.” Education of children of Chinese merchants (and Sino-French education at large), in this light, was an essential element of growing French shifting attitude both toward its own ideological approach and robust Chinese presence in the colony. As the colonial government transitioned into a more collaborative and self-proclaimed “humanized” phase in its governing style, it promoted a bilateral mode of co-existence with Chinese traders by encouraging French colonists, as summarized by Robert, to “acquire an essential bond, to force a level of sympathy so reserved from the beginning, and to reciprocate with the knowledge of our language” with Chinese communities. To be sure, this so-called reorientation of colonial ideology put French interests at the center as much as it was motivated by concerns about a competitive trans-imperial world in which Chinese mobility, emigration, and networks also exposed themselves to Japanese influences. As a French colonist insisted, “let us hope that we understand the imperative of the Sino-French project since, next to China, we have Indochina, which can qualify as a fulcrum for our actions there and where, in addition, live hundreds of thousand Chinese from Canton, Fujian, Hainan, Teochew, and Hakkas with varied dialects and slightly different mentalities. Most are small traders; the rest remain monopolists of big industries. The Annamites will undoubtedly supplant a small proportion of our interest and European houses will multiply in response, but Chinese trade will always be there and extremely important.”<sup>36</sup>

Second, the French regime in Indochina was genuinely concerned about Chinese disinterests in French culture despite their contact and mutual interactions in the colony. This anxiety about the French’s lack of understanding about their “co-existing strangers” and Chinese disregard for any potential cultural reciprocation in light of increasingly entangled Sino-French relations was

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

only to be intensified by Chinese merchants' conventional practices of sending their coming-of-age children to receive a modern high-school and tertiary education in China and Japan. This feature was of course not peculiar to the French colony. The perceived insufficiency of a good Chinese education, particularly in the realm of high-school and university education, informed the trajectories of many young Chinese in Southeast Asia. The *doyen* of overseas Chinese studies, historian Wang Gungwu, recalls in his recently published memoir a common path shared by many of his contemporaries: going back to China for further schooling even as he was already educated in English school in Ipoh (Malaysia). In Nanjing, Wang was exposed, for the very first time, to serious study of the Chinese classics and attended philosophy courses centered on the principles espoused by Sun Yat-Sen. In his memory, concepts such as revolution, nationalism, natural rights, and equality were novel and almost elusive to him while attending British school in Malaya and he developed renewed theoretical understandings of them in relation to his then changing view of western imperialism.<sup>37</sup>

Such ideological awakening in China, as described by Wang, constituted a central governing threat to European colonial governments in Southeast Asia. In British Malaya, local branches of the Nationalist Party were banned and the teaching of Three People's Principles was cracked down on in all Chinese schools.<sup>38</sup> The British and the Dutch governments, outpacing their French counterpart in Indochina, had implemented restrictive and interventionist political ordinances to regulate Chinese schools as early as 1919 partly in response to the outburst of uncurbed democratic demonstrations in China over the Treaty of Versailles and extra-territoriality.<sup>39</sup> The French colonial government followed suit in 1931 with a decree that prohibited all circulation of Sun Yat-

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<sup>37</sup> Wang Gungwu, *Home Is Not Here* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2018). pp. 168-171.

<sup>38</sup> A. É Belogurova, *The Nanyang Revolution: The Comintern and Chinese Networks in Southeast Asia, 1890-1957* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

<sup>39</sup> Lim Guan Hok, "Development of Chinese Education in Singapore (1819-1979)," p. 436.

Sen's philosophical textbooks that had to do with the three principles (*Tam Dân Chủ Nghĩa*) and prevented Chinese schools from teaching these “reactionary ideas” that undermined political stability.<sup>40</sup>



**Figure 11:** Lycée Franco-Chinois à Chợ Lớn

Source : Manh Hai's Collection of Historic Photos

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/13476480@N07/36136612201/in/photostream/>

As a consequence, a political concession had to be made as a resolution to managing perceived instability and advancing French interests in Southeast Asia: to facilitate Chinese merchants' wishes of allowing their children to be in contact with their Chinese roots without leaving the colony, the French authority needed to step in to provide what Chinese communities traditionally perceived as lacking while fulfilling its goal of exposing them to French culture and knowledge. In light of French public view steering towards a “Franco-Chinese policy” in

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<sup>40</sup> *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* [The Women Daily], October 15, 1931. TVQGVN. p. 23.

Indochina that redressed what Paul Beau called the “under-utilization of Chinese talents” and encouraged “the study of French without neglecting Chinese culture,” an idea for a new Franco-Chinese school was soon proposed, but received very little interest and financial backing from Paris.

To bypass this bureaucratic antipathy in the interest of time, Beau shared his inspiration with an intimate personal network of powerful Chinese merchants in Chợ Lớn with the hope of mobilizing moral and financial support for this project. Unsurprisingly, nobody but Beau was up to the task given his long-standing facilitation of Chinese merchants and their businesses, “much to the disgust of those who clung to the time-honored policy of viewing Chinese migrants as alien intruders to be kept down by stringent regulations.”<sup>41</sup> Showing that Indochina valued cooperation with the Chinese, Beau, by granting Chinese capitalists natural French citizenship and encouraging Chinese investment in rice mills, attempted to deter them from relocating their fortunes elsewhere and to promote a rooted and loyal community that “furthered the welfare of the colony.”<sup>42</sup> This political agenda held an enormous appeal to a wealthy Chinese merchant class whose careers, properties, and economic activities had been tightly linked to the colonial government’s interests. As a matter of fact, on the initiative of Sir. Tjia-Mah-Yan, the rice tycoon of Cochinchina, and a group of merchants, bankers, factory managers, and entrepreneurs, a private organization called L’Association du Lycée Franco-Chinois was established to rally around Paul Beau’s agenda and soon tasked with fund-raising and enlisting subscribers who would donate to the schools’ operational budget. Additionally, this association would be in charge of further infrastructural acquisitions and conservation for the school. On March 31, the popularity of a plan for a Franco-

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<sup>41</sup> “Untitled,” *The Straits Times*, 14 March 1908. NewspaperSG, NLB.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.



Chinese High school could be seen in a surge in the amount of donation from the association's members, which was reported to successfully reach 152,000 piastres in private donations alone.<sup>43</sup>

Owing to an early successful fund-raising effort and excitement among the Chinese community, an inauguration ceremony took place on February 26, 1908 in the presence of Governor-General Paul Beau, his assistant and French Sinologist M. Harduin, and the Deputy for Cochinchina Ernest Outrey. M. Schneegans, the newly appointed president of the Association of Franco-Chinese School, declared to an audience packed with French and Chinese notables in Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn the opening of a modern high school that “recognized the significance of Chinese settlement in Cochinchina and attuned to their educational needs so that they receive a complete French and Chinese education instead of being forced to be sent to China.” The mayor of Chợ Lớn, M. Drouhet further reinforced this point, highlighting how the Lycée Franco-Chinois would advance the stature of Chợ Lớn from an urban economic capital to a “perfect embodiment of French eclecticism and colonizing pride.” With aplomb, he asserted that this new high school would contribute to the “radiant evolution of Asian mentality and the making of a center of French influences in our colony” by putting an end to the “anomalous” educational trajectory of Chinese youth and encouraging them to live under French tutelage, instead of other imperial centers.<sup>44</sup> Concluding the event, Paul Beau recapped these crucial missions and underlying motivation that necessitated the construction of such a school:

Until now, Chinese merchants wishing to give their children a good education used to send them to China, back to their home provinces to learn the characters and precepts of their philosophers. Some other merchants, enamored of new ideas, directed their children to schools in Japan. This system had, from the moral point of view, the downside of suppressing over many years the guardianship of their parents and, from the political point of view, uprooted

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<sup>43</sup> “Franco-Chinese School,” *The Straits Times*, 8 April 1908. NewspaperSG, NLB.

<sup>44</sup> « Enseignement. Indochine. Un Lycée Franco-Chinois à Chợ Lớn, » *Revue de L'Enseignement Français Hors de France*, Paris : 1908, Volumes 5-6. p. 117.

each generation of young Chinese born in our soil, ultimately transforming them into foreigners knowing neither our language nor our ideas.<sup>45</sup>

The earliest foundation for the Lycée Franco-Chinois was subsequently erected on a five-hectare land plot generously donated by Sir. Tjia-Ma-Yan, situated squarely in an area described as “geographically favorable, precisely half-way in distance between Sài Gòn and Chợ Lớn.” At the heart of Chợ Lớn, the school, located then on Rue Cây Mai (soon renamed Rue des Frères Louis, and today Nguyễn Trãi street), operated on a meager annual subvention of 6000 piastres from the colonial government and the rest of its budget, as previously explained, came from private donations by wealthy local Chinese—subscribers of the Association that managed it—and the Chinese Chamber of Commerce.<sup>46</sup> In fact, Paul Beau’s inauguration speech offered a glance at the people who were involved in the financing of the High school that set it into motion as he offered them honorific distinctions. In addition to a few prominent rice mill owners, backers from the Chinese chamber of commerce, including the Chợ Lớn municipal counsellor Lư-Lục, and its then-president Phùng Nhứt, were in the long list of acknowledgement.

### *Curriculum, Operation, and Financial Struggle*

The ideological and practical missions of Lycée Franco-Chinois, as set out by its founders and investors, to become an instrument of French propaganda by maintaining a harmonious relationship with wealthy Chinese traders and protecting Indochina from external imperial influences were deeply embedded in the structuring of its curriculum and operation. As a private institution made possible largely by Chinese funds, the high school worked closely with French

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid. pp. 117-118. See the full reproduction of Paul Beau’s inauguration speech of the Lycée Franco-Chinois also in this volume.

<sup>46</sup> « Le Gouverneur de la Cochinchine a Gouverneur General de l’Indochine, » *Dossier Relatif à la Subvention en Faveur du Lycée Franco-Chinois*, Année 1926-1926, GOUCOCH T.036 N31881. TTTLQG-II, HCMC.

administrators and sought their consultations to build its educational programs. As a matter of fact, the school was soon placed under the direct supervision of the Governor General of Indochina similar to many other state-funded public schools such as the Lycée Chasseloup-Laubat and Collège de Mytho, which signified its political status and entanglement with the French regime. It was administered by a mix board of directors comprising of eighteen members, including six French and twelve Chinese. These members had the administrative power to appoint the directors and instructors of the school with the approvals of the director general of public education of Indochina.<sup>47</sup>

The promise to ensure a bilingual education for Chinese students in the Chinese and French languages was reflected in the curriculum, which spanned five years for a secondary degree. Courses of study included a diversity of disciplines and areas of knowledge: foreign languages, Chinese literature, Chinese poetry, philosophy (both Asian and French), mathematics, physics, chemistry, and a number of vocationally oriented subjects. First-year students were to be enrolled in French-language courses and those already familiar with the language would be instructed mainly in French. Vocational subjects such as business, accounting, or interpreting were specifically developed to target Chinese students with commercial backgrounds who wished to work in trading houses once they graduated in these various capacities. Teachers were employed from other Francophone institutions in Sài Gòn so there were significant crossovers of instruction in many subjects such as French history and geography. Chinese teachers, however, were hired only to undertake the teaching of Chinese-language courses; most were recruited from the Hà Nội College of Pedagogy, then later from the graduates of Lycée Franco-Chinois itself. French reports revealed an imbalance in the curriculum despite the institution's collaborative Sino-French nature.

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<sup>47</sup> « Enseignement Franco-Chinois, » *La Dépêche Coloniale Illustrée*. 15 May 1908. BNF.

French languages and cultural courses predominated the curriculum; out of twenty-eight hours of class every week, only ten (accounting for only thirty-five percent) were reserved for Chinese studies. In order to acquire a diploma, students were required to successfully pass an exit examination in both French and Chinese. Such degree was critical to securing an administrative job in Cochinchina whether in the bureaucracy or in French-language schools throughout the colony; it was also a valuable asset that enabled Chinese students to get access to overseas French universities in Shanghai or in France.

Despite a rather generous donation from the outset and political support from prominent French colonists, the Lycée Franco-Chinois faced recurrent budgetary issues and resulting political challenges. But it was in this very arena of struggle and its longevity in the face of such impediments that the intertwined global and local complexity of Sino-French collaboration could be effectively reexamined. According to the memories of Michel Brun, former director of the French department of the school in Chợ Lớn, to make the school appear as an attractive option for local Chinese communities, administrators relied on its initial donations to build infrastructure and subsidize tuitions, hence lowering the costs of study and boarding fees. In the first year of opening, Lycée Franco-Chinois enrolled approximately 50 pupils and this number rose to about 113, which then necessitated the construction of a second building to accommodate boarders.<sup>48</sup> Even with the slow increases in enrollment, burdened by additional construction costs to facilitate student's rising needs and low tuitions that did not generate sufficient income, the school confronted a financial crisis that began in 1911. A few other reasons prevailed, in addition to poor financial planning exhausting its donation, that would explain such early tumultuous phase of its operation. The first

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<sup>48</sup> Michel Brun, « Il y a un Peu Plus de 100 ans à Chợ Lớn, le Lycée Franco-Chinois Devenu il y a 50 ans le Collège Fraternité, » Ancien Directeur de la section Française du Lycée. <http://www.namkyluctinh.com/a-ngoaingu1/MBrun-Lyceefrancochinois.pdf> (accessed August 2020).

immediate cause that came to mind was a matter of timely politics: Paul Beau had already retired from his post by this period and a new generation of French leaders such as the new mayor of Chợ Lớn, M. Helgouach, and Henry D. Tastes, administrator of Civil Services and the president of Chợ Lớn's municipal commission had difficulties catching up with Beau's legacies of forging stable relationships with Chinese subscribers of the association and secure their donations. Many of whom, as reported by the board director of the school, either passed away or ended up with bad business conditions around this time, which inflicted upon the institution's operating budget. The colonial records indicated that by 1914, the school had retained only roughly 30,000 or 40,000 piastres in its budget. A major trading house, which Tracy Barrett later discovered to be the property of the prominent businessman Lý Đăng (also a councilman on the school board), went bankrupt without notice, leading to a loss of 10,000 piastres in promised funding.<sup>49</sup>

The life of Lycée Franco-Chinois thus paralleled the rise and fall of Chinese businesses in Cochinchina because of the conspicuous links between the financial and political interests of its prestigious board members to its institutional establishment and colonial politics. While Chinese donations from prosperous establishments and wealthy merchant families remained the financial lifeblood for Lycée Franco-Chinois, the school's reliance on these sources of income in the operational framework of Franco-Chinese collaboration meant that the unpredictable fluctuations of Chinese industries as part of a global phenomenon of commercial flux and flow would influence, if not determine, its destiny. The gradual burn-out of rice businesses in the 1910s, beginning in Indochina with the 1919 rice trade crisis and the progressively unfavorable commercial situations

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<sup>49</sup> « Monsieur de Tastes, Administrateur des Services Civils, Président de la Commission Municipale de Chợ Lớn, à Monsieur le Gouverneur de la Cochinchine, Sài Gòn, » 29 June 1922, *Dossier Relatif à la Situation Financière du Lycée Franco-Chinois à Chợ Lớn*, Année 1922. GOUCOCH T.036/R.27 N4667. TTLTQG-II, HCMC. On Lý Đăng, see Chapter 4 "The Bankruptcy of Chợ Lớn's Ly Family, 1871-1913," in Tracy C. Barrett, *The Chinese Diaspora in South-East Asia: The Overseas Chinese in Indo-China*. pp. 70-94.

in Southeast Asia on the eve of the Great Depression that drove local rice firms to bankruptcy, factory foreclosure, and business owners' departures for China, would take a heavy toll on this secondary institution.<sup>50</sup> This was a pervasive phenomenon unexclusive to French Indochina. Chinese high schools in colonial Singapore, in comparison, suffered from similarly drastic financial shortage when the prices of rubber and tin—commodities at the heart of Malayan wealth that constituted Chinese predominance—plummeted in the event of the economic recession. The cause was a structural and inherent one: “all Chinese high schools were either supported by a particular bang or by the entire Chinese community.”<sup>51</sup> In Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn, decline in Chinese capital and active donations led to an overwhelming financial downturn for the school, which required a new set of resolution to be addressed. Colonial administrators, in acknowledging the vitality of a Sino-French High School to French political governance and regional stability, worked closely with Chinese leaders in the 1920s to uplift the institution.

The nature of state-society synergy was evidently reflected and reinforced in further Sino-French efforts to keep the institution afloat in the midst of its financial crisis, given their mutual desire to sustain its continuing existence. In fact, the French government, long viewing the high school as one of its core colonial projects, realized the ineffectiveness of existing Sino-French framework and intervened. Its director and administrators decided, for a time, to aggressively petition for additional governmental subventions and even drew political attention to the unused French indemnity that the Qing government had yet to pay back during the Boxers' Uprising a few decades ago. Indeed, according to an administrative correspondence between Maurice Monguillot, then acting Governor-General of French Indochina, and the minister of colonies, an urgent request

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<sup>50</sup> “Di’An Mi Jiao Xiaoxi Zhongzhong 堤岸米教種種 [Various News on the Rice Industry in Chợ Lớn],” *Nanyang Yanjiu* 南洋研究 [Southeast Asian Research], Volume 2. 3. NLB Chinese Collection.

<sup>51</sup> Yan, *The Ethnic Chinese in East and Southeast Asia*. p. 195.

for subsidies to be levied on the Boxer indemnity fund in support of the Franco-Chinese High school's survival as "first-rate propaganda of French influence in the Far East" and possible expansions to accommodate internal growth had been submitted for consideration to the French consul in Peking.<sup>52</sup> Although initially delayed, the fund was then approved a year later by the ministry of foreign affairs in Paris through a directive telegram to M. Fleuriau, the Minister Plenipotentiary of the French Republic in China, in recognition of the importance of the Franco-Chinese High school in Chợ Lớn.<sup>53</sup> On January 1922, after a meeting at the General Assembly of the Administrative Council, Chinese and French leaders reached an initial deal to save the school from intermittent closures that lasted since 1917 by offering a sum of 80,000 piastres from the sureties collected from new Chinese immigrants upon their arrival in Sài Gòn, which reportedly helped the school to cover basic expenses over an estimated four-year period.<sup>54</sup>

The French government was not the only party invested in the resumption of Lycée Franco-Chinois's activities. The Chợ Lớn Chamber of Commerce and Chinese congregations representing their diverse constituents were determined to join the taskforce to save the high school from sinking deeper in debt. Realizing that political initiatives were imperative to fixing the situation, they initiated the process through the instrument of reforming the tax collecting apparatuses. This began with a congregation-wide motion in Chợ Lớn in 1922 to demand an additional five percent taxes imposed on registered Chinese traders to be used exclusively for the development of Lycée Franco-Chinois. What was most radical about this proposed measure that bewildered the colonial

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<sup>52</sup> « Le Gouverneur General de l'Indochine, Commandeur de la Légion d'Honneur à Monsieur le Ministre des Colonies, » *Dossier Relatif au Lycée Franco-Chinoise Années 1923-1927*, GOUCOCH R.27 N31882. TTLTQG-II, HCMC.

<sup>53</sup> « M. A de Fleurieu, Ministre Plénipotentiaire de la République Française en Chine, a Son Excellence Monsieur Raymond Poincaré, Président du Conseil, Ministre des Affaires Etrangères à Paris, » 11 September 1923. GOUCOCH R.27 N31882. TTLTQG-II, HCMC.

<sup>54</sup> « Monsieur de Tastes, Administrateur des Services Civils, Président de la Commission Municipale de Chợ Lớn, à Monsieur le Gouverneur de la Cochinchine, Sài Gòn, » 29 June 1922. GOUCOCH T.036/R.27 N4667.

administrative circles in Indochina at first glance was Chinese leaders' call to extend regular congregational influences in Chợ Lớn to other Chinese dialect groups beyond it by allowing Chợ Lớn's municipal officials to collect these taxes in Sài Gòn and other Cochinchinese provinces. Chợ Lớn's congregations, with full backing from the Chinese Chamber of Commerce's leaders, argued that "Chinese living in the interiors also sent their children to be educated at Lycée Franco-Chinois, hence necessitating their duties to pay taxes that contributed to the common welfare of this institution...why should the burden fall on the shoulder of Chợ Lớn's Chinese alone?" On receiving the request, Henry D. Tastes convened a meeting with the chamber of commerce and congregation leaders to discuss the issue. It was revealed that Yip-Pak-Hang, the president of Chinese Chamber of Commerce, held a favorable view of the additional five-percent taxes, a sentiment widely shared by those present at this convention.<sup>55</sup> Taxes, as a matter of representation and so-called public utility, remained a sensitive issues to French colonial governance. Unsurprisingly, Chợ Lớn Chinese's proposed measure to impose more taxes on Chinese and other Asians living in the interiors was immediately met with resistance from French administrators, who viewed its potential approval to be undermining French legitimacy and republican principle of equality. For example, the first-class governor of colonies rejected outright the commission municipal of Chợ Lớn's request on October 1922 on the ground of impracticality and unlawful precedents, and proposed a deal to provide instead a recurrent subsidy of 3000 piastres to supplement its insufficient budget.<sup>56</sup> The mayor of Sài Gòn, adjacent to Chợ Lớn, also found the

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> « Le Gouverneur de 1ere Classe des Colonies à Monsieur le Président de la Commission Municipale de la Ville de Chợ Lớn, » 21 October 1922. GOUCOCH T.036/R.27 N4667. TTLTQG-II, HCMC.



proposal to be too far-fetched to be adopted as he insisted “the creation of new resources through a surtax must be equal to all.”<sup>57</sup>

In spite of these earlier resistances, the Chinese tax reform proposal was nevertheless approved in 1924 and to be expired in 1932, after which a reconsideration of taxing scheme remained open to revision again. A French financial report indicated that the annual fund collected from the surtaxes collected by Chợ Lớn’s congregations enabled Lycée Franco-Chinois to cover the costs of staff and faculty hiring, doctor, building maintenance, equipment purchases, and supplies. Over the course of nine years, these additional taxes brought consistent financial streams that supported the institution’s seamless operation and largely conditioned its budgetary prowess and spending patterns.<sup>58</sup> In 1933, when the tax ordinance of 1924 was reviewed, prominent French administrators upheld their favorable opinion of the surtaxes, claiming that “the services that the high school offered throughout these years had benefitted tremendously not only Chinese people in our colony and their businesses, but also European and French commerce” and that “thanks to former high school students returning to China, the French language is now accepted at all schools in Canton alongside English, which fulfilled an inescapable political importance.”<sup>59</sup> It should be noted that in 1932, that the Lycée Franco-Chinois still maintained its political prestige among circles of French administrators and continued to stand as a crucible of Sino-French political leverage was also partly due to its awareness of a politically active Republican China. The ROC then began to accelerate its scheme to set up more overseas Chinese elementary and middle schools

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<sup>57</sup> « Le Maire de la Ville de Sài Gòn à Monsieur le Gouverneur de la Cochinchine, Sài Gòn, » 18 November 1921, GOUCOCH T.036/R.27 N4667. TTLTQG-II, HCMC.

<sup>58</sup> « Situation Financière du Lycée Franco-Chinois, » *Taxes Perçues Par les Villes de Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn au Profit de la Chambre de Commerce Chinois et du Lycée Franco-Chinois, Années 1930-1942*. GOUCOCH T.20 N26124. TTLTQG-II, HCMC.

<sup>59</sup> « Le Président du Conseil d’Administration du Lycée Franco-Chinois à Monsieur le Gouverneur de la Cochinchine, » 26 October 1933. GOUCOCH T.20 N26124. TTLTQG-II, HCMC.

in Southeast Asia. As Han Xiaorong elaborates, the ROC overseas Chinese affair council recommended and approved 22 schools to be established and openly encouraged over 232 overseas Chinese students to return to China for schooling. French colonists, as well as their British and Dutch neighbors, reacted to the ROC's policies with fear and precautions and accused the Chiang Kai-Shek's regime of "arousing Chinese imperialism" in the region.<sup>60</sup>

If anything, the political advancement of the surtax initiatives to fund a sinking Chinese high school regardless of colonial administrative deterrence and Sino-French persistent effort to maintain such institution revealed the agency, if not paramount political influence, of Chợ Lớn's Chinese in the colonial bureaucratic hierarchies not only vis-à-vis French colonists, but also other centers of Chinese settlements in Cochinchina. Tracy Barrett, employing a Skinnerian model of local system hierarchy that explains urban configuration of commercial networks and political administration, points out that Chinese congregations in Chợ Lớn remained a central nexus of trade in the larger branch of Chinese socioeconomic organizations in southern Vietnam and therefore exercised the capability to wield power over rural congregations.<sup>61</sup> The Franco-Chinese High school was originally conceived as a trans-imperial project motivated by French concern about its influence in a swiftly changing world of imperial competitions and the spread of Chinese nationalism. By proxy, the school represented the apex of Franco-Chinese policy in Southeast Asia, which sought a collaborative approach to colonial governance by forging beneficial ties with Chinese merchant elites and a minimization of external political threats by providing children of Chinese merchants an apolitically rooted study environment. Such political ambitions in the

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<sup>60</sup> Xiaorong Han, "Continuities and Discontinuities in Politics: The ROC and PRC Policies Toward Overseas Chinese, 1912–66," *The Chinese Historical Review* 25, no. 1 (January 2, 2018): 23–45, p. 26.

<sup>61</sup> Tracy C. Barrett, "A Hierarchy of Geographies: A Skinnerian Model of Indochina's Overseas Chinese *Congrégations* and Their Influence on French Colonialism," *Frontiers of History in China* 10, no. 1 (March 23, 2015): 74–95.

cultivation of Francophile Chinese subjects could not have been unilaterally achieved through French initiatives themselves. Rather, as demonstrated, Chợ Lớn's Chinese and its political institutions contributed to the making of such an institution through an enduring process of persistent collaboration and compromises with French colonists. Chinese education and Sino-French collaboration, in this mode of analysis, reflected the complexity of inter-ethnic co-existence and questioned presumed notions of hegemonic colonial modernity and education as merely a linear mechanism of identity preservation.

Transnational practices that complicated Chinese co-existence with the French regime in colonial Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn could be further illuminated in the communities' struggles over issues of life and death. A principal character of urban mutual aid and native-place associational initiatives that supported migrants' livelihood, Chinese traditional burials and commemoration of the deceased ran counter to an emergent panoptic colonial regime whose differing concepts of health and modernity clashed with existing Chinese traditions and cultural conventions.

### **“Fallen Leaves Go Back to Their Roots”: Chinese Management of Death and the French Biopolitical Regime**

On July 29, 1892, the members of Chợ Lớn's Chinese community sent a heart-wrenching letter to their congregation head and the city councilor to voice their opinions on a matter of urgent nature. “The remains of our compatriots,” this letter exclaimed, “have been here with us the whole time and still cannot be repatriated per their family's wishes.” These Chinese petitioners went on to explain their situations that “the usual process of returning out dead relatives home is

indefinitely delayed because some of us cannot cover the expenses of thick leads required to store and seal mortal remains as required by French law.”<sup>62</sup>

This public outcry reveals the harsh nature of the floating urban existence in colonial cities that shaped Chinese migrants’ experiences where the precarity of sojourning culture had reinforced the importance of community initiatives in offering migrants various forms of safety nets and social protections. In addition to taking care of the sick, proper management of dead bodies so that the deceased could be laid to rest peacefully and undisturbed in the cares of their relatives remained one of the foremost responsibilities of local Chinese leaders. Such endeavors, as commonly understood, helped alleviate the trepidation of migrants’ lives both for the dead and the living by maintaining a non-disruptive familial lineages and social norms in the disquietude of insecure, unpredictable, and makeshift urban livelihood under colonial governance. Terry Abraham and Priscila Wegars demonstrate widespread Chinese exhumations and repatriations as popular cultural practices since the mid-nineteenth century in North America when sojourning Chinese laborers would “paid a fee to a name affinity or regional association that, if necessary, would manage his burial, removal, and shipment back to his home village.”<sup>63</sup> In colonial Vietnam, as Tracy Barrett notes, deceased Chinese migrants would similarly be managed by his representative mutual aid associations whose responsibilities involved transferring their remains back to China, followed by proper local funerary rituals and customs in the home villages.<sup>64</sup> Local anecdotes circulated in Chợ Lớn, which described how Chinese settlers “brought their coffins with them, not

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<sup>62</sup> “Petition to Chan-Seng and Luru-Lục, Chiefs of the Congregation of Canton in Chợ Lớn, and Than-Oai, City Councilor,” 29 July 1892, GOUCHO D.694 N12607, *Dossier Relatif au transport en Chine des cercueils des Chinois exhumés à Chợ Lớn années 1892-1893*. TTLTQG-II, HCMC.

<sup>63</sup> Terry Abraham and Priscila Wegars, “Urns, Bones and Burners: Overseas Chinese Cemeteries,” *Australasian Historical Archaeology* 21 (2003): 58–69.

<sup>64</sup> Tracy Barrett, “Transnational Webs: Overseas Chinese Economic and Political Networks in Colonial Vietnam, 1870-1945” PhD Dissertation, Cornell University, 2008.

in expectation of imminent death but in promise to themselves that wherever their living bodies may wander, dead they will be returned to China,” further reinforced the cultural significance of such practices.<sup>65</sup>

Exhumations of dead bodies and overseas repatriations of their remains were, however, by no means a simple procedure. In nineteenth-century Southeast Asia, Chinese management of death as a component of its holistic and transnational funerary practices was complicated by what Rachel Leow calls the “colonial situations” that rendered a new relationship between “modernity, health, and political power.”<sup>66</sup> The diverse landscape of urban communities, coupled with the presence of a nascent colonial regime with distinct preconceptions of knowledge, practices, and politics, carved out a frictional field of interactions emblematic of a clash between “a set of time-honored values and the transformative force of urbanity and modernity.”<sup>67</sup>

The colonial imposition of a new scientific regime of knowledge and medical practices upon indigenous societies, as scholarship shows, disrupted traditional native practices, and impinged on existing systems of indigenous knowledge. This feature of the colonial encounter, as defined by David Arnold in the case of the British Raj and colonized Indians, involved the attempt to “use the [colonized] body as a site for the construction of its own authority, legitimacy, and control.” In other words, while colonialism engaged itself in a hegemonic project of transforming native being, it employed “an enormous battery of discursive texts and practices,” both embedded in a humanitarian sensibility and imperial superiority, to control and discipline the “bodies” through

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<sup>65</sup> Hermann Norden, *A Wanderer in Indochina, The Chronicle of a Journey through Annam, Tong-King, Laos, and Cambodia, with Some Accounts of Their People*, (London: H.F. & G. Witherby, 1931), pp. 19-20. NLB Southeast Asia Collection.

<sup>66</sup> Rachel Leow, “Healing the Nation: Politics, Medicines, and Analogies of Health in Southeast Asia,” in T. N. Harper and Sunil S. Amrith, eds., *Histories of Health in Southeast Asia: Perspectives on the Long Twentieth Century*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014).

<sup>67</sup> Christian Henriot, *Scythe and the City: A Social History of Death in Shanghai*, pp. 4-5.

cooptation and coercive processes.<sup>68</sup> Christian Henriot further reveals in a social history of death in semi-colonial Shanghai that the omnipresent visibility of Chinese remains dumped on urban streets from those who died of poverty, wartime atrocities, and incurable sickness became a haunting spectacle for European colonists and their “civilized” space. The colonial administration, in an effort to restore social order and remove themselves from contact with Chinese graves, set up foreign cemeteries and determined exclusive access to these sites strictly on class and racial lines in the guise of public health ordinances. Managements of Chinese death, both for migrant labor and those living in foreign concessions, consequently fell squarely into the hands of benevolent societies and native-place associations.<sup>69</sup>

To further highlight the complexity of urban diasporic co-existence, I draw attention here not only to a political contestation between two co-existing social groups—Chinese migrant communities in Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn and a nascent French colonial authority—over critical matters of death, burial, and management of remains but also to a new French governmentality that employed emergent biopolitical discourses of proper hygiene and sanitized “bodies” to disrupt Chinese transnational practices of bodily repatriations. The short-lived moment, while making only a transient appearance in the colonial records in 1892, pointed towards a complex conundrum of colonial urban life where modernity both shaped and complicated the boundaries of sociopolitical interactions. When the Cantonese congregations of Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn sought approval from the French colonial government to exhume and repatriate 2000 Chinese bodies back to China through the port of Hong Kong, they tapped into persisting governing anxieties of a consolidating colonial regime especially in light of its vulnerability to existing epidemical threats

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<sup>68</sup> David Arnold, *Colonizing the Body: State Medicine and Epidemic Disease in Nineteenth-Century India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), pp. 7-8.

<sup>69</sup> Christian Henriot, *Scythe and the City: A Social History of Death in Shanghai*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), See Chapter 5 “Foreign Cemeteries and the Colonial Space of Death,” pp. 195-224.

in Indochina and to a global crisis of trans-imperial contagion as a consequence of interconnectedness. The tension and heated exchanges generated from this encounter rooted in divergent practices and understandings of health and hygiene, I contend, exposed the unpreparedness of French administrators in handling the (medically) pluralistic nature of its subjects while revealing the agency of urban Chinese congregations in serving as a contentious force to push back against French hegemonic impositions.

In this sense, a fuller understanding of Chinese communities' engagement with French colonists over sensitive issues of death and burials provides us with the analytical opportunity to situate French biopolitics in the trans-local nature of Chinese cultural networks and the contestation of colonial knowledge that entailed multilayered political negotiations, yet at times constrained by the discriminatory reality of colonial ideologies. Such enhanced understanding will also help shed further light on Chinese navigation of colonial hegemony, what the scholarship on Chinese diasporas in Southeast Asia has revealed as a common political strategy and mode of interactions. It shows how the increasingly repressive colonial state in a cosmopolitan, multiethnic space as Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn could not turn a blind eye to grievances put forth by its Chinese "subjects" and was forced to renegotiate its own visions and approaches to effective governance by accommodating political demands where needed.

### ***Biopolitics and Colonial Anxieties over Chinese "Others"***

Besides the importance of congregational leadership and its involvement in the repatriation of remains that soon followed, it is equally critical to understand the social and political exigency that motivated a colonial disruption of corpse movements in the context of the French consolidation of their biopolitical apparatuses. Control of indigenous health and sanitation has

been the hallmark of modern French colonialism. In the advent of the finalized annexation of Sài Gòn in 1863, the French colonial regime, in the name of civilization and progress, employed Western medicine as what Laurence Monnais calls a “weapon of pacification.”<sup>70</sup> Tropical pathologies (such as cholera, bubonic, smallpox, malaria, dysentery, etc.) posed a challenge to French authority at the onset of colonization. As much as these seemingly incurable diseases, in the mind of French colonists, convinced themselves of the backwardness of indigenous societies, they provided an additional layer of rationales for the colonial regime to intervene on behalf of the “uncivilized” native and save them from unwanted death. This combination of racialized fear of colonized others and the colonial imperatives, through the obsessive medium of medical sciences, to eradicate these pathological threats resulted in a hegemonic imposition of medical discourses and knowledge, strongly manifested in various colonial health policies, upon colonized communities on its receiving end. Michael G. Vann describes this process, evoking James C. Scott’s theorization of “high modernism” as “the construction of an interventionist state within the racialized logic of colonialism.”<sup>71</sup>

Historians and sociologists of empire have long articulated the segregated and divisive nature of colonial urban planning that isolated white European enclaves from ethnic quarters while concentrating key imperial “civilizing” developments in the *colons*-inhabited areas. They have also demonstrated the impetus and emerging modes of *governmentality* provided by colonial fear of and contradictory views toward contagions in the re-creation of colonial spaces and the structuration of public health regimes in East and Southeast Asia. Some popular examples of this

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<sup>70</sup> Laurence Monnais, “Preventive Medicine And ‘Mission Civilisatrice’ Uses of The BCG Vaccine in French Colonial Vietnam Between the Two World Wars,” *International Journal of Asia Pacific Studies (IJAPS)* 2, no. 1 (2006): 40–66, p. 41.

<sup>71</sup> Michael G Vann, “Hà Nội in the Time of Cholera: Epidemic Disease and Racial Power in the Colonial City,” in Laurence Monnais and Harold J. Cook ed., *Global Movements, Local Concerns: Medicine and Health in Southeast Asia*, (Singapore: NUS Press, 2013), 150–70, p. 151.



included what Jiat-Hwee Chang calls “splintered urbanism” referring to the British de-prioritization of native areas in colonial Singapore while investing heavily in well-ventilated and spacious military cantonments to protect European soldiers from tropical detriments, or the invention of “hill stations” in colonial Đà Lạt, removing Frenchmen from contact with “filthy” native and offering them a salubrious metropolitan-like environment.<sup>72</sup> As the mobility of migrants, goods and resources, and information sustained colonial empire-building, colonial authorities must confront the dilemmas of restricting movements while promoting French hygienic standards that rendered the “tropic” a safe and modern habitat.

French colonial cities, such as Hà Nội and, in this case, Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn, were central sites of planning that shaped the intricate entanglement of “colonial urbanism”, public health, and new governmentality. As Michael G. Vann demonstrates in a recent urban history of epidemics in Hà Nội, French administrators began to legislate health ordinances that allowed investigators to patrol the city’s commercial sectors and close down “narrow” alleys central to the urban economy in the event of a bubonic plague wrecking the city in 1904. French officials blamed the uncurbed spread of plague infecting European residents on poor sanitary standards practiced by the native, conveniently ignoring the fact that the occurrence was as much due to, on the one hand, the concentrated development of squalid colonized enclaves and, on the other hand, as to underfunded public infrastructural projects to improve the sewage and waste system, long overshadowed by the erection of opulent establishments and magnificent buildings standing as a symbol of French

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<sup>72</sup> Eric Thomas Jennings, *Imperial Heights: Dalat and the Making and Undoing of French Indochina*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); Jiat-Hwee Chang, "'Tropicalizing' Planning: Sanitation, Housing, and Technologies of Improvement in Colonial Singapore, 1907-42," in Robert Peckham and David M. Pomfret, *Imperial Contagions: Medicine, Hygiene, and Cultures of Planning in Asia* (Hong Kong University Press, 2013), pp. 37-59.

cultural superiority.<sup>73</sup> In colonial Sài Gòn, racial segregation, lurking behind in the architect of urban transformation and the colonial ideology of stratification, was reflected in the zoning of distinctive European-styled houses, and native and Chinese quarters. It necessitated French exhortation of improved sanitary and health standards and close supervision of the health of a mixing urban population. Gwendolyn Wright, citing a municipal report, reveals the intention of French health ordinance, which was “designed above all to isolate from this part of the city the poor Asiatic element whose proximity constitutes a real danger because of the ignorance of the most elementary rules of hygiene.”<sup>74</sup>

As a result, the construction of French biopolitical discourses that dominated colonial imperatives to modernize native health practices in reaction to their perceived danger and backwardness was not only a characteristic tale of urban modernity, but also one of ethnic racialization. While the former manifested itself in urban planning, geographical imagination, and distinct segregations of neighborhood, the latter projected French ethnocentric views of the Chinese in Chợ Lớn and the city itself as justification for intervention and hegemonic impositions via the instrument of public health campaigns and bureaucratic prohibition to rid the Chinese enclave of vices and unsanitary elements. This particular European derogatory purview of Chinese others was, in fact, a global phenomenon taking place in port cities all over the world as a component of surging anti-Asian racism that came to define European immigration surveillance regimes and rising political activism of settled Chinese communities to resist discrimination.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Michael G. Vann, “Of Rats, Rice, and Race: The Great Hà Nội Rat Massacre, an Episode in French Colonial History,” *French Colonial History* 4 (2003): 191–203; See Chapter four in Gwendolyn Wright, *The Politics of Design in French Colonial Urbanism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), pp. 161–234.

<sup>74</sup> Gwendolyn Wright, *The Politics of Design in French Colonial Urbanism*, p. 222.

<sup>75</sup> See, for example, Nayan Shah, *Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco’s Chinatown*, American Crossroads 7 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Adam McKeown, *Melancholy Order: Asian Migration and the Globalization of Borders*, Columbia Studies in International and Global History (New

From the emergent trope of “yellow perils” that justified the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act in north America to the Dutch-British stringent health legislatures targeting the Hajj community for fear of transoceanic pilgrimage disease transmission, Euro-American imperial regimes constructed prevalent discourses and praxis of health on the intersecting foundations of state-of-the-art technological modernity and Orientalized “others.”<sup>76</sup> In colonial Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn, the French regime was fearful of Chinese “exotic” burial and exhumation practices due to a persisting and contradictory stereotype of Chinese migrants as unruly, lacking in sanitary standards, and cliquish.<sup>77</sup> Yet, these same essentialized views must be reconciled with a discursive rhetoric of “useful Chinese” that, while simultaneously reinforcing what Marie-Paule Ha calls “a burdensome white superiority complex” to justify its intervention, separated the Chinese from not-so-competent native, leaving a complex grey area of political negotiations and concession between the Chinese communities and French rule.<sup>78</sup> In other words, as Ann Laura Stoler once provocatively argued, racism and the making of racial distinctions within colonized societies remained central to colonial regimes’ configuration of their biopower.<sup>79</sup>

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York: Columbia University Press, 2008); David C. Atkinson, *The Burden of White Supremacy: Containing Asian Migration in the British Empire and the United States*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017); Anh Sy Huy Le, “The ‘Orientals’ Strike Back: Displacement, Diasporic Resistance, and Spatial Justice in the 1906 San Francisco Earthquake and Fire,” *Journal of Migration History* 4, no. 1 (March 21, 2018): 134–60.

<sup>76</sup> Charles J. McClain, *In Search of Equality: The Chinese Struggle Against Discrimination in Nineteenth-Century America* (University of California Press, 1996); Eric Tagliacozzo, “Pilgrim Ships and the Frontiers of Contagion, Quarantine Regimes from Southeast Asia to the Red Sea,” in *Harper and Amrith, Histories of Health in Southeast Asia*, pp. 47–60.

<sup>77</sup> See remarks made by the colonial scholar Charles Robequain in *The Economic Development of French Indo-China*. (Oxford UK: Oxford University Press, 1944), p. 38.

<sup>78</sup> Marie-Paule Ha, “The Chinese and the White Man’s Burden in Indochina,” in Elaine Yee Lin Ho and Julia Kuehn eds., *China Abroad: Travels, Subjects, Spaces*, (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009), pp. 191–207.

<sup>79</sup> Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault’s History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995).

French hammering down on Chinese communities and Chợ Lớn as a breeding ground of infectious diseases, especially in the event of what would soon transpire as one of the largest requested mass-movement of bones in the 1890s, was motivated by a few distinct but interrelated rationales. First, a ramification of the colonial conquest, Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn's rapid transformation into a global port city at the turn of the twentieth century, had shaped its pluralistic urban landscape defined by the making of multiethnic Chinese, Vietnamese, Indians, and European enclaves while consistent commercial exchanges intensified social interactions within and beyond the scope of the city. The French authority remained sensitive to this developing bustling urban crawl and concentration of multi-ethnic enclaves within such space. Secondly, the globalized nature of Sài Gòn as a port city also intensified its linkages to other East and Southeast Asian ports, making public health a primary concern for the safeguarding of French civilizing mission. The French developed a hyper-sensitivity to epidemics originating from southern China, which infiltrated Indochina via ship activities and interactions in port cities such Sài Gòn, Canton, and Hong Kong. Historian Florence Bretelle-Establet highlights the French establishments of medical consular hospitals in Southwest China from 1898 to 1930 as a means to combat a violent bubonic plague in Guangzhou in 1894 and also "the threats of public health posed by increased mobility via waterway, land and railway."<sup>80</sup> In the age of global empires, mobile communities and networks as well as increased interconnectedness through trade and steamships were thus a double-edged sword whose successful colonial control, as Eric Tagliacozzo argues, served as a yardstick for its conquests and civilizational responsibilities.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Florence Bretelle-Establet, "Resistance and Receptivity: French Colonial Medicine in Southwest China, 1898-1930," *Modern China* 25, no. 2 (1999): 171–203.

<sup>81</sup> Eric Tagliacozzo, "Pilgrim Ships and the Frontiers of Contagion, Quarantine Regimes from Southeast Asia to the Red Sea," pp. 47-60.

The French escalating fear of epidemics informed colonial public health legislation and thus their radical approaches to hygiene by the late nineteenth century. In the following decades, colonial fear of tropical diseases again induced a massive institutionalization of public health in Indochina, including both the formations of the Colonial Health Advisory Council in 1890 and a Colonial Health Corps, a company that represented French doctors in the colony. The appointment of Governor-General Paul Doumer in 1897, coinciding with the formalization of the Indochinese Union that claimed protectorate status to Tonkin, Laos, Cambodia, Annam and turned Cochinchina into a full-fledged colony, accelerated the expansion of existing health campaigns into large-scale, coherent, and longer-term programs. It was during this same year that concerns over public health reached a climax and terrorized an already-alarmist colonial government when a cholera outbreak devastated Cochinchina, “claiming some victims among the Europeans of Sài Gòn and in the districts of Sóc Trăng, Bến Tre, and Biên Hòa.”<sup>82</sup> Preceding these moments of political exigency that set the stage for colonial panics, Cantonese congregation president, Phan Hoài, initiated a request to the mayor of Chợ Lớn on July 29, 1892, asking the French authority to permit Chinese annual tradition of repatriating remains of the deceased to Hong Kong. Such startling request in light of increasing public health risks made a commotion among local administrators and became a topic of dispute in the years that followed.

### ***Chinese Responses: Chợ Lớn’s Cantonese Congregations and Repatriation Initiatives***

On September 20, 1892, at 8:30AM, M. Trucy, the head of health service and the president of the colonial board of public health, convened a meeting to discuss the intention of Chợ Lớn’s Chinese to carry out a mass-exhumation of over 2000 remains of deceased Chinese. The meeting involved high-ranked officials and important government personnel who were in charge of health

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<sup>82</sup> Barrett, *The Chinese Diaspora in Southeast Asia*, p. 108.

and sanitation-related issues in the colony: M. Tuniac, Mayor of Sài Gòn; M. Gubian, Director of Public Work, Albert Calmette, doctor and then-director of the famed Pasteur Institute in Sài Gòn; M. Duchene, veterinarian; and M. Martenot, first-class doctor. Due to fear of unhygienic contagions and coffin cluttering, the board voted unanimously to delay the exhumation process until December of the next year. One member of the committee insisted that the Chinese in Chợ Lớn were “unprepared to undertake such a massive endeavor and would be unable to cope with the expenses generated to meet our health standards.” These incurring expenses would include the costs of coffin-wood quality improvements, necessary constructions of straw huts, as well as acquisitions of additional land to protect shipments coming from the interior while they waited to be transported overseas.

A month later, Pan-Wei, the head of the Cantonese Congregation of Chợ Lớn, was anxious about French postponement of an administrative legislative release and delivered a letter to the colonial council. In it, Wei appealed to the lieutenant-governor for an ultimatum regarding colonial authorization to exhume bodies of deceased Chinese who had passed away for more than 5 years.<sup>83</sup> This letter revealed two sets of prevalent, co-existing confusion (or even discomfort) in how two social groups with distinctive ideologies and desiderata encountered each other: the French formalization of sanitization procedures with extra-demands that seem unreasonable in the eyes of Chinese leaders and the Chinese’s struggle to maneuver within the structure of French hygienic modernity. This early phase of collision began on the ground of disagreements over what constituted safe coffin materials. French administrators decisively rejected the Chinese proposal to use traditional wood material for coffin-making and, after a self-proclaimed consultation with

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<sup>83</sup> “Pan-Wei, Head of the Cantonese Congregation of Chợ Lớn appeals to the Lieutenant-Governor of Cochinchina”, 22 October 1892, GOUCOCH D.694 N12607, *Dossier Relatif au Transport en Chine des Cercueils des Chinois Exhumes à Chợ Lớn Années 1892-1893*, TTLTQG II-HCMC.

Cochinchina's wood merchants, had put the entire repatriation process on a temporary chokehold. This was a collective outcome reached by members of the newly minted Board of Health and Sanitation. Together, they reaffirmed the legal power of the decree of December 12, 1889 that required Chinese congregations to "observe strictly all the opinions of this board" and "to proceed to the construction of coffins using Sao wood (golden oak)." They believed that the enhanced durability and thickness of Sao wood would provide a better seal preventing corpses from leaking obnoxious germs to the air that could be later dangerously inhaled. As such, the French colonial government instructed their surveillance forces to enforce stricter rules: "the inner layer of each coffin must be made of lead with a minimum thickness of 0.3 centimeters and then tightly enclosed in Sao coffins of at least 4 centimeters in diameters."<sup>84</sup> In his letter, Pan-Wei foregrounds his opposition to this decree by making clear his opinion on behalf of the Chinese in Chợ Lớn:

We have the honor to thank you very much for your concern regarding our health and other sanitary issues. However, the Sao wood (golden oak) is too heavy in weight and cumbersome for construction. It is the kind of wood that we reserve especially for the building of pagodas and that is *forbidden* from any other purposes. We hope you will reconsider your authorization for us to utilize either the Vên-Vên or Huỳnh as these types of wood are significantly lighter and more favorable for transport.

In the same month, on December 22, 1892, the Mayor of Chợ Lớn, M. Merlande, addressed the Cochinchinese Governor's concerns regarding the underway mass-exhumation of deceased Chinese in the city of Chợ Lớn. The French government again demanded that the Chinese leaders construct the coffins using the Sao wood (Golden Oak) instead of the Huỳnh wood (*terminalia*) or Vên-Vên wood (*mersawa*). Merlande pointed out, ironically in favor of the Chinese, that Chinese preference for either *terminalia* or *mersawa* wood was fully justified as, he maintained, "it is lighter hardwood and thus meets our purposes of accelerating the transports of coffins to China at much

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<sup>84</sup> "M. Merlande, Mayor of Chợ Lớn, appeals to the Secretary General of Cochinchina", GOUCOCH D.694 N12607, TTLTQG II-HCMC.

shorter notice.” Merlande concluded that “the choice of wood has only a minor importance in public health as what mattered more is how the corpses are processed before they are moved to coffins.”<sup>85</sup> Drawing on his past administrative experiences, M. Merlande warned, that the number of these exhumations “will consequently be very considerable and estimated to rise to more than 2000 bodies for Chợ Lớn only. A previous repatriation movement took place in 1887 and included about 1607 coffins.”<sup>86</sup>

Conventionally, Chinese communities, in compliance with French regulations, had carried out mass-exhumations under the following conditions. Bones and remains were first tightly enclosed in small coffins made of thick wood, securely held by iron bands and distributed in groups of nine in larger boxes. These boxes would then be sterilized with disinfectants, a chemical concoction of sawdust and zinc sulphate, and finally deposited in huts established by Chinese associations under French supervision within the city interior. However, the new decree that modified these existing requirements had caused enormous dismay among the Chinese circles of Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn. In addition to bureaucratic demands that dictated the minutiae detail of exhuming procedures, caused delay in regular executions, and made the presence of a European officer during the process mandatory, the updated decree of December 1889, for the first time, criminalized those who dared to overstep colonial authority and conducted bone transports without authorization. Any form of infraction would result in a 20-piastre fine for breach of civil requirements and would be persecuted in accordance with the provisions of a criminal code that fell under violation of sepultures.<sup>87</sup> Receptive to the colonial tightening measures, M. Merland

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<sup>85</sup> “M. Merlande, Mayor of Chợ Lớn, addresses the Lieutenant-Governor of Cochinchina”, 22 December 1892, GOUCOCH D.694 N12607, TTLTQG II-HCMC.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> « Chinois-Transport en Chine, » *Recueil Analytique des Circulaires, Instructions et Avis Concernant l'Administration de la Justice en Indochine, Emanant du Ministre de la Justice, du Ministre des Colonies, du Gouvernement General et du parquet General de l'Indochine*. Tome I, 1908, BNF, pp. 657-658.



consequently urged the General Secretary of the colony to be especially sensitive and attuned to this matter in legal implementations because, in his words, “it is of utmost political importance for the colony as it concerns the Chinese worship of the dead.”<sup>88</sup>

From the perspectives of Chợ Lớn’s Chinese leaders, proper burials, clean exhumations of their countrymen’s corpses, and a smooth transport of these remains to their native land were not simply an issue of hygiene, an imperative prioritized by French colonists. Rather, these funerary businesses extend beyond the confine of the colonial construction of “hygienic modernity”: they represented a tenacious effort to maintain certain spiritual and familial linkages to their idea of a homeland while upholding a respectful and proper tradition that bound together local communities. But why Hong Kong surfaced as a place of such paramount importance to the Chinese communities in Vietnam in their mission to return the deceased to where they belonged? While intimate commercial connections, as I explained in a previous chapter on the rice trade, could partially answer this question, Elizabeth Sinn’s in-depth studies of regional associations in Hong Kong and the global networks of mutual relations, capital, and affects it fostered among the Chinese diasporas have explained this conundrum in terms of its “tri-focal effects.”<sup>89</sup> From the early nineteenth century on, Hong Kong maintained its prominence first and foremost as a kind of in-between place, a trans-oceanic gateway linking migrants abroad to their native land, where a robust culture of regional association blossomed to protect the welfare of new Chinese migrants arriving in the colonial city—many of whom later immigrated elsewhere. These associations, by means of sustaining an informational networks, returning the dead, and participating in disaster relief works, also played a critical extraterritorial role in forging connections with Chinese

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<sup>88</sup> “M. Merlande, Mayor of Chợ Lớn, addresses the Lieutenant-Governor of Cochinchina”, GOUCOCH D.694 N12607, TTLTQG II-HCMC.

<sup>89</sup> Elizabeth Sinn, “Xin Xi Guxiang: A Study of Regional Associations as a Bonding Mechanism in the Chinese Diaspora. The Hong Kong Experience,” *Modern Asian Studies* 31, no. 2 (1997): 375–97, pp. 377-378.

communities abroad. Furthermore, Hong Kong's pre-twentieth century precedent as an epicenter of transitory global Chinese migration cemented the port city's migrants' linkages with Southeast Asia and this feature certainly transcended trade and commercial relations to include socio-familial and cultural networks, constituting what historian Philip Kuhn described as a salient "cultural corridor" and a historical ecology characteristic of migrant-sending-and receiving societies.<sup>90</sup>

In addition to its centrality as a place of transit and in-between exchanges with the Nanyang, Hong Kong's eclecticism as the converging domain of multiple regional sub-ethnic ties that reinforced what Benedict Anderson famously theorized as an "imagined community"<sup>91</sup> of people who spoke similar dialects and hailed from adjacent hometowns could not be underestimated. As Sinn points out, "between 1863 and 1939, over 6.3 million Chinese left China through Hong Kong."<sup>92</sup> This influx of Chinese migrants, far from homogeneous and kaleidoscopic in birthplaces, hometowns, and dialect groups, originated from two dominant Chinese macro-regions, the Southeastern Coast (Teochew, Hakkas, Hokkien) and Lingnan (Cantonese, Hakka, Hainan). The Cantonese people, rooted in the Lingnan ecology of the Pearl River Delta, accounted for the majority of Chinese populations migrating to southern Vietnam since the Manchu conquest and accelerated with the development of Canton as a licensed free-trade port in 1757 and the British seizure of Hong Kong in 1841.<sup>93</sup> Along with the concomitant rise of Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn as another center in the Nanyang trade emporium under French tutelage, labor migrations through southern

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<sup>90</sup> Philip A. Kuhn, *Chinese among Others: Emigration in Modern Times*, State and Society in East Asia (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009); See also, Philip A. Kuhn, "Why China Historians Should Study the Chinese Diaspora, and Vice-Versa," *Journal of Chinese Overseas* 2, no. 2 (November 1, 2006): 163–72.

<sup>91</sup> Benedict R. O'G Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, (London; New York: Verso, 2006).

<sup>92</sup> Elizabeth Sinn, "Hong Kong As an In-Between Place In The Chinese Diaspora, 1849–1939," in Donna Garbacia and Dirk Hoerder eds., *Connecting Seas and Connected Ocean Rims: Indian, Atlantic, and Pacific Oceans and China Seas Migrations from the 1830s to the 1930s*, (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 226-227. January 1, 2011, pp. 225–47.

<sup>93</sup> Michael Williams, "Hong Kong and the Pearl River Delta Qiaoxiang," *Modern Asian Studies* 38, no. 2 (2004): 257–82; See also, Philip Kuhn, *Chinese among Others*, pp. 36-38.

Chinese ports only intensified, consolidating the emergence of vital Cantonese-Chinese communities in Cochinchina. The overwhelming presence of Cantonese congregations in the French records over other dialect groups, particularly in these vital community issues relating to death, burials, and movements of Chinese remains, speak to their unique importance as an influential and politically involved group. Cantonese links to Hong Kong incentivized local mobilizations against colonial health interdictions in the collective interest of local Chinese welfare while revealing the complexity of colonial governance in managing a community with intimate transnational connections. In fact, earlier on, a few prominent members of Chợ Lớn's local government and the Cantonese congregation had made clear to the French authority their positions on the indispensable nature of bodily repatriation. Chan-Seng and Lưu-Lục, both municipal counsellors of Chợ Lớn, and Thân-Oai, then chief of the Cantonese congregation, expressed their opinions strongly in a letter to the city mayor, averring that "it is customary to keep elaborate records of the bones of Chinese who had passed away for more than five years, to respectfully deliver their remains back to China, and to bury them properly in their native soil. This is a sacred custom that has long been religiously observed by each congregation within our city." Hong Kong, as a mobile port city, a center of outmigration, and a spiritual layover for the dead awaiting their turns to "go home," therefore configured prominently not only in the sustenance of Chinese livelihood in colonial Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn but also reinforced the imperatives of repatriation as an indispensable task to Chinese leaders against French intrusive public health policies.<sup>94</sup>

On December 9, 1893, the head of the Cantonese congregation of Chợ Lớn wrote to the lieutenant-governor of Cochinchina, complaining about the impossibility of finishing the project

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<sup>94</sup> "Chan-Seng, Lưu-Lục, and Thân-Oai's Letter to Chợ Lớn's City Mayor", 29 July 1892, GOU COCH D.694 N12607, TTLTQG II-HCMC.

within the colonial council's prescribed timeline. One of the major difficulties facing the exhumation and transportation process was the synchronous coordination of corpses that were retrieved from different districts within Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn. In order to meet the required timeline, this project would demand seamless executions from both the French and Chinese authorities, as well as what he proposed to be an increase in administrative capacity on the side of the Chinese institutions. The Cantonese leader begged the French administrators to "establish the right orders with which the exhumation project could be implemented" and to let multiple appointed personnel to "begin without delay in the interior their painful and pious duty."<sup>95</sup>

On 14 March 1893, M. Rossigneux, the Mayor of the city of Chợ Lớn confirmed with the Lieutenant-Governor the challenges facing the entire colonial project to stall the progresses of Chinese exhumation and the effort to subject Chinese conventional procedures to new French formalities. As the mayor of a predominantly Chinese city, Rossigneux was mostly reserved about the quick pace in which new public health ordinances were to be enforced within this complex urban space. In his role as a mediator, he effectively served as a helpful source of intelligence for the French colonial police while managing to accumulate much valuable local knowledge of Chợ Lớn's Chinese standard practices when it came to handling mortal remains of their dead compatriots. The transport of Chinese bodies that had died for more than five years was a ritualistically intricate and emotionally sensitive process. As Rossigneux demonstrated in his letter to the governor-general of Cochinchina, he recognized the dangers, both physically and spiritually, of French mass-transport approach to dealing with corps and their elaborate sanitization procedures:

The objections presented by the Chinese against the grouping of small coffins and the use of double envelopes seem to me to be well-founded and worth considering carefully: they make

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<sup>95</sup> "Correspondance between Cantonese Congregation Leaders and M. Foures", 9 December 1893, GOUCOCH D.694 N12607, TTLTQG II-HCMC.

cases very heavy and difficult to handle; besides, the expense is considerable enough. And if dangerous emanations were to result from the transport of these bones the existing precaution taken would be insufficient. [...] I believe there is nothing to fear and the danger, if there is any, would be during the operation of the exhumation made in the cemeteries.<sup>96</sup>

For this reason, the Chinese thus vehemently opposed the uses of double-envelop coffins (thickened wood) and the demanded efficiency of mass transportation that required sending bodies to China in groups. French rationales in accelerating this process were quite clear: they wanted to avoid the putrid odor emanating from decayed corps and what they perceived as the slowness of individual coffin transportation. The Chinese, however, found this enforcement invasive and unnecessary. The head of the Cantonese congregation backhandedly suggested to Rossigneux that in reality French formalities were rather inefficient. Double-enveloped wood was not only too weighty to be carried to the port of Sài Gòn in preparation for trans-oceanic shipping, but it was also expensive. Furthermore, the difficulty in handling these heavy wooden coffins would potentially result in the insufficient protection of bones. As one Chinese leader asserted, “if there is anything to be feared, it is the transport of these bones in unwieldy coffins during the operation of the exhumation conducted in cemeteries.”<sup>97</sup> Rossigneux was responsive to Chinese grievances, appealing on their behalf to the Cochinchinese governor for a prompt reconsideration of said procedures and urging the colonial police to be facilitating and collaborative in monitoring the process.

However, Chinese indignation reached a high point on March 3, 1893 when Cantonese congregation leaders wrote to the Lieutenant-Governor to refute the underway French decree that would force the Chinese congregations to unconditionally abide by French procedures in

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<sup>96</sup> « M. Rossigneux, Maire de la ville de Chợ Lớn à Monsieur le Lieutenant-Gouverneur, Sài Gòn, » 14 Mars 1893, GOUCOCH D.694 N12607, TTLTQG-II, HCMC.

<sup>97</sup> “Correspondance between M. Rossigneux, Mayor of Chợ Lớn and the Lieutenant-Governor of Cochinchina”, 14 March 1893, GOUCOCH D.694 N12607, TTLTQG II-HCMC.

delivering their countrymen's corps back home. One leader questioned the feasibility as well as the ethical nature of French requirement to gather and ship bodies in groups of nine in a large box. "One serious disadvantage for us," he lamented, "is that these large boxes cause us at first great expenses in addition to being of considerable weight and difficult handling." However, he further stressed, "the procedure could cause great dismay to the families of the deceased due to its potential delay and painful misplacement of bodies" because, as he reminded the French authority, "not every remain comes from the same localities." Acutely aware of French attempt to "sanitize the bodily exhumation process" by imposing a specific set of hygienic standards on the transportation of remains to Hong Kong so as to avoid plaguing the colony with dangerous contagions, Cantonese leaders were embroiled in a discursive battle with the French public health bureau over properly sterile corpse-handling procedure. It is important to reiterate here that by the late nineteenth-century, French colonial obsessive control of plagues was informed by new scientific advances in bacteriology, which had redefined conventional mechanism of epidemic spread from person-to-person to microscopic transmissions under a central "germ theory" that Carl Nightingale argues to have spurred a 'segregation mania' in global colonial cities. European utter willingness to impose draconian measures on the native to eradicate slightest threats of unhygienic contagions targeting the poor and ethnic groups led to local resistance to colonial public health initiatives. In Hong Kong, local Chinese spearheaded one of the largest political revolts against British segregation policies as they "violated the sanctity of the household and made it impossible for family members to give respectful attention to sick and dying loved ones."<sup>98</sup>

Similarly, Chinese leaders in Chợ Lớn persistently sought authorization from the French government to eliminate the uses of large boxes to enclose wooden coffin during transport. Ruth

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<sup>98</sup> Carl H. Nightingale, *Segregation: A Global History of Divided Cities* (University of Chicago Press, 2012), 168.

Rogasky's research on the modern transformation of public health in Republican China is suggestive at this juncture when she emphasizes the agency of Chinese elites in Tianjian, drawing on their experiences and divergent understandings of what constituted cleanliness, contributed to the construction of "hygienic modernity."<sup>99</sup> Cantonese Chinese leaders were not passive recipients of French "modern" ideas about hygiene and health either; they were, instead of unconditionally submitting to its rules and regulations, actively contesting such impingements on common community's practices that remained critical to their traditions and livelihood. In so doing, they attempted to carve out a space of political compromises to assert their perspectives without running the risks of full colonial stoppages. In a subsequent exchange, Chinese congregational leaders confidently stated that:

We believe that you imposed this measure on us only for fear that the bones will produce dangerous emanations, but this is unfounded. Once buried for a long time, the corpses are absolutely dried. All hairs and nails are destroyed, thus emitting no smells. Our exhumation methods make sure that not a single trace of organic matters will remain in the coffins. Besides, the colonial police officers must, according to your order, already forbid the exhumation of the bodies whose state of conservation was questionable and hazardous, potentially resulting in dangerous exhalations."<sup>100</sup>

They proceeded to describing in detail Chinese traditional methods of preserving and exhuming dead bodies, which, in their persistent opinions, did not run *counter to* French idea of hygiene. On the contrary, they further demonstrated how current Chinese approaches could be the most efficient method vis-à-vis French legislative requirements, thus making it an essential component of, rather than an outlier from, "modern" health practices:

After the exhumation, the remains are exposed to the sun so that all moisture from the soil in which corpses were buried could evaporate. Subsequently, these dried remains are subjected to fumigation by sandalwood. They then are placed in small coffins filled with a quantity of quicklime about equal in weight to that of the bones. The alkalinity from this quicklime will

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<sup>99</sup> Ruth Rogaski, *Hygienic Modernity: Meanings of Health and Disease in Treaty-Port China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

<sup>100</sup> "Petition from the Cantonese Congregation leaders delivered to the Lieutenant-Governor of CochinChina", 3 March 1893, GOUCOCH D.694 N12607, TTLTQG II-HCMC.

easily destroy any harmful germs that could cause diseases if these germs had penetrated the bodies even five years after death.

We are of the opinion that our carefully designed procedure obviates the need for any extra measure, such as an iron-crated box that would easily damage the bone and bodies of the deceased. Regarding hygiene, this box will have no use, except for convenient storage purposes from Sài Gòn to Hong Kong, as the chemicals and tightly sealed coffins have protected corpses from any dangerous exposure to the outside air.

We do not believe that the health and safety council and the police officers in charge of the exhumation surveillance fully share our opinion and we held a firm belief, Lieutenant-Governor, that you would like to reconsider your precaution whose uselessness seems obvious and which has caused us great troubles.<sup>101</sup>

On-the-ground medical pluralities that manifested in distinct communities' conceptions of hygiene and practices rendered it a highly difficult task for the colonial government to enforce a common standard for a new French-centered public health regime. Historian Sokhieng Au acutely points out a persisting issue in French approach to hygiene and health: "public health measures were often established well before the public accepted the reasoning behind them."<sup>102</sup> Implementation of health campaigns, including their technology of surveillance, prohibition, and new scientific measures was often motivated by elite colonial ideology, rather than a substantial understanding of what actually transpired among living communities. As new health ordinances and their enactment became intrusive and met with resistance from locals, the colonial authority revised and renegotiated existing hegemonic practices in line with affected populations. Such modes of operation through a process mirrored in the case of childbirth in colonial Vietnam that Linh Thùy Nguyễn describes as "negotiated modernity" remains the marker that defined colonial public health and medicine.<sup>103</sup> Chinese resistance to bureaucratic delays and French sanitation requirements, and the entailed Sino-French exchanges reflected not only a contingent process of political compromises and negotiations that questioned the theoretical convention of Chinese

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Sokhieng Au, *Mixed Medicines: Health and Culture in French Colonial Cambodia* (University of Chicago Press, 2011), p. 98.

<sup>103</sup> Thùy Linh Nguyễn, *Childbirth, Maternity, and Medical Pluralism in French Colonial Vietnam, 1880-1945*, Rochester Studies in Medical History, v. 37 (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2016).



collaborationism in characterizing their relationship to the French but also a no less critical aspect of plural adaptations as a principle of co-existence in a cosmopolitan urban space. In other words, Chinese presence and their sociocultural practices, in this particular case funerary traditions, revealed Chinese politics to be a reckoning force that, rather than subdued, dictated, or coopted by colonial modernity, contributed its own visions and initiatives to important transformations in colonial governance.

As a matter of fact, M. Foures, Lieutenant-Governor of Cochinchina, in a petition from the Chinese Congregation of Canton to the central administration of French Cochinchina in Sài Gòn, remarked that the December 12, 1889 decree that sought to submit Chinese exhumation activities to certain French legal formalities would be shortened in duration and applied with more prudent directives from the colonial health council. The governor implored local authorities to wrap up the process quickly in three months from December to February. “Dead remnants”, which must consist of only bones, will be enclosed in wooden coffins, made of Huynh and Ven specialized wood, instead of the original golden oak. Although these wooden coffins would now be tolerated, the transport to China had to take place expressly within two months without any delay and that the walls of the coffins, at least 3 centimeters thick, shall be fastened tightly with nails. The ordinance that European officers shall assist all exhumations would stay in place, but only to ensure that the opening of graves took place within less than 5-day to avoid the illegal exhumation of mortal remains whose unauthorized state of preservation could give rise to dangerous exhalations. Since coffins in transit will be temporarily deposited on the land within Chợ Lớn interior, the Cantonese congregation had been entrusted with the task of protecting these while awaiting them to be shipped out of Sài Gòn. In the name of health and public safety, Foures insisted that these amended

formalities remained necessary measures of goodwill whose proper executions would only benefit communities in the colony.<sup>104</sup>

In 1927, annual Chinese repatriation made the headline again in international news. The British colonial newspaper *Straits Times* reported that the French steamship *Derwent* had transported a cargo of 3017 boxes of human bones to Hong Kong. It further revealed that the French government, with sanctions of the deceased's descendants and relatives, continued to facilitate Chinese wishes to exhume remains in Chợ Lớn and deliver them back to China.<sup>105</sup> The longevity of such practices in the face of stringent colonial regulations in subsequent decades meant that Chinese political effort was not entirely futile. They managed to question French imposed formalities upon their custom, viewing its rigorous implementations of coffin materials and “rational”, modern procedures as an attack on existing Chinese mobility. Moreover, as sociologist Brenda Yeoh argues in the case of the community battle to gain control over Chinese sacred burial grounds in colonial Singapore, the Chinese polite and increasingly confrontational rejection of French protocols regarding corpse excavation and transfer in its claim to modernity remained a propitious moment of resistance against the “erosion of Chinese control over their sacred space.”<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> “Correspondance between M. Foures and Cochinchina’s Administrators”, GOUCOCH D.694 N12607, TTLTQG II-HCMC.

<sup>105</sup> Untitled, *The Straits Times*, 20 August 1927. NewspaperSG, NLB.

<sup>106</sup> Brenda S. A. Yeoh, “The Control of ‘Sacred’ Space: Conflicts over the Chinese Burial Grounds in Colonial Singapore, 1880-1930,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 22, no. 2 (1991): 282–311, p. 291.

## **The Emergence of Chinese Hospitals: Social Welfare and Legal Contestations**

### ***The Growth of Colonial Hospital Networks and Chinese Establishments***

The rise and emergence of Chinese hospitals closely paralleled the development of colonial healthcare in Indochina. A center of colonial capitalism and crucial maritime outpost, the entire Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn region received key investments in the medical domain, leading to a proliferation of healthcare facilities in the course of a few years. This included, as Laurence Monnais summarizes, “a tuberculosis institute, cancer prevention services, an ophthalmological clinic, and an ear, nose, and throat clinic,” soon followed by “a mental asylum (Bien Hoa, 1919), an institute of pediatrics (1927), and an institute for the prevention of venereal diseases (1929).” In the 1930s, a period of intensive public health reorganization in the colony, the Hospital Association of Cochinchina emerged as an umbrella organization to systematically regulate and administer core southern Vietnamese hospitals including the Indigenous Hospital of Cochinchina, the Drouhet Hospital, and the Chợ Quán Hospital. In sum, these Franco-indigenous premises employed a total of sixteen physicians and fifty-six nurses in addition to managing a range of medical training institutions for nurses and native midwives.<sup>107</sup>

Yet, distinct from native entanglement with French public health that subjugated Vietnamese colonial subjects to French *hôpital indigènes* and its mobile networks of rural dispensaries, Chinese communities exercised a degree of institutional and logistical autonomy from the concurrent system. This feature was most evident in two underappreciated dimensions of colonial politics often blurred by a conventional focus on the colonizer-colonized binary. First, while the ideological framework of civilizing mission and reorientation of colonial public health imperatives

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<sup>107</sup> Laurence Monnais, “In the Shadow of the Colonial Hospital: Developing Health Care in Indochina, 1860-1939,” in Gisèle L. Bousquet and Pierre Brocheux, eds., *Việt Nam Exposé: French Scholarship on Twentieth-Century Vietnamese Society* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), p. 164.

from a period of intensive reorganization to local adaptation dictated patterns of care and interactions between the colonial regime and Vietnamese native, Chinese involvement in this structure was complicated by a system of transnational welfare rooted in the dynamics of local initiatives and overseas institution with intimate connections to Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn. The case of Hong Kong's Tung Wah hospital, widely celebrated among the global Chinese diaspora as the first institution of its kind to pioneer charitable works and transnational healthcare among overseas Chinese communities, was illuminating of the governing conundrum that the French faced.<sup>108</sup> In 1934, at the height of a global economic crisis that depressed the colonial economy, the French consul in Hong Kong, in coordination with colonial administrators in Cochinchina, pressured Chinese congregation leaders to be transparent and expedite in working with representatives from Tung Wah hospitals to resolve a large amount of reimbursement that was claimed to be unpaid by this institution. It was soon revealed that prior to the recess the Tung Wah hospital participated in a large-scale repatriation of destitute Chinese from Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn to Hong Kong so that these "poor elements" could be lodged and properly treated before being sent back to their home counties. In addition to providing necessary upfront payments to cover transportation costs for Chinese evacuees, Tung Wah hospital also financed accommodation and meals for poor Chinese from Cochinchina. As Andrew Wilson further indicates, in addition to its role as "the main instrument of community cohesion and elite activism," Hong Kong's Tung Wah hospital (*Donghua Yiyuan*),

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<sup>108</sup> The Tung Wah Hospital (中華醫院) was established in 1870 when the British colonial government consolidated its status as a treaty port. Operated earlier on with a high degree of autonomy by Chinese merchant elites, the hospital practiced Chinese medicine and remained popular with the local Chinese population in Hong Kong until being significantly restructured with the interference of Western-dominated medical staff when a bubonic plague hit Canton in 1894. The hospital, with an extensive network of donation and intimate linkages with the Chinese overseas communities, also functioned as an important center of charity and benevolent initiatives to support Chinese migrants living in Southeast Asia. For a more comprehensive treatment of this history, see Shu-Yun Ma, "The Making and Remaking of a Chinese Hospital in Hong Kong," *Modern Asian Studies* 45, no. 5 (September 2011): 1313–36; Mo Wah Moira Chan-Yeung, *A Medical History of Hong Kong: 1842-1941*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

“provided not only medical services and rudimentary welfare, but also served to coordinate local elite activities and to communicate with the government in Beijing.”<sup>109</sup> While the Tung Wah’s presence in the colonial records demonstrated well the importance of Hong Kong’s charitable initiatives in assisting with Chinese healthcare management in the colony, French surprising entanglement in the middle of an ambiguous financial dispute among Chinese congregations and the Hong Kong’s hospital reflected a combination of *laissez faire* attitudes that left migrant communities’ welfare in the hands of congregational leadership, and situational supervisions when issues affecting colonial authority emerged.<sup>110</sup> Local Chinese hospitals, in fact, arose in this context of what I call “regulated” autonomy: Chinese local health initiatives, assisted by their overseas contingents, funded for communities and remained relatively independent of French standardization effort while congregations worked with local authorities to defend Chinese practices in the potential intrusion of colonial healthcare imperatives.

Second, it is widely acknowledged among studies of the Chinese settlements across the globe that discriminatory ideologies and practices in white-dominated society toward the Chinese as alien communities and pernicious “invaders” threatening existing economic and social equilibria pushed Chinese leaders to develop Chinese-led socio-legal institutions as a means of combating dominant prejudices and managing community welfare.<sup>111</sup> In the urban milieus of Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn and colonial Indochina writ large, local Chinese hospitals were established in response to a comparatively similar impulse. While segregation as a concept, this dissertation argues, when

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<sup>109</sup> Andrew R. Wilson, *Ambition and Identity: Chinese Merchant Elites in Colonial Manila, 1880-1916* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2004), p. 82.

<sup>110</sup> *Dossier Relatif au Remboursement des Frais de Rapatriement des Indigents Chinois de Venus de Cochinchine à Destination de Canton et ses Environs Assurés par le « Tung Wah Hôpital » à Hong Kong Année 1934*, GOUCOCH S.633 N7305. TTLTGQ-II, HCMC.

<sup>111</sup> One of the most notable studies to date on the subject remains Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2004); On Chinese legal initiatives to resist discrimination, see Yucheng Qin, *The Diplomacy of Nationalism: The Six Companies and China’s Policy toward Exclusion* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2009).

placed in the complexity of Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn's multiethnic co-existence and the interdependent nature of Sino-French relation, was not a monolithic racialized practice, French stereotypical attitudes toward Chinese communities as well as Vietnamese characterization of them as virulent plague-carriers rendered the making of Chinese hospital a necessary move in a rather racially hostile environment. Chinese living quarters continued to be targeted by the colonial authority on the brink of a 1908 epidemic as “veritable plague-spots” and insanitary overcrowding areas that formed “the greatest danger to the public health.”<sup>112</sup> Vietnamese commentators, furthering this argument in public discourse, often chastised Chinese enclaves in Chợ Lớn as sites of frequent unhygienic routines. One journalist insisted, “the Chinese, reputed for being dirty—a fact that everybody knows—did not even maintain a standard of cleanliness for themselves while cooking, not to mention making food for us Vietnamese...be they roasted ducks or chickens, dried beef, pork, livers, or kidneys, etc., they carried foodstuff around the city uncovered and exposed to germs, but still sold them all...who dared to eat those filthy ‘murderous’ things?”<sup>113</sup> The recurrence of double social marginalization embedded in Franco-Vietnamese views of Chinese others and public health policies that targeted Chợ Lớn motivated congregation leaders to rise to the occasion and become effective mediators to represent communities’ interests in welfare management and the medical realm. These initiatives, riddled with complex layers of operation, legal compromises, and colonial resistance, will be analyzed in the cases of two prominent establishments: the Cantonese Hospitals, including those collaboratively built by the Fujian and Teochew congregations, and the Hakka Hospital, established by a late-comer to the theater of intra-ethnic and colonial politics.

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<sup>112</sup> “Overcrowding at Sài Gòn,” *The Straits Times*, 24 November 1908, NewspaperSG, NLB, p. 11.

<sup>113</sup> *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* [The Women Daily], 20 October 1932, p.4. Cited in Nguyễn Đức Hiệp, *Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn, Đời Sống Xã Hội và Chính Trị qua Tư Liệu Báo Chí (1925-1945)* [Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn: Everyday Lives and Politics through Newspapers Sources (1925-1945)], (TP Hồ Chí Minh: Nhà Xuất Bản Tổng Hợp, 2019), pp. 37-38.

Elizabeth Sinn describes the creation of Chinese hospitals as “a manifestation of the segregation between the governance and the governed.”<sup>114</sup> In the case of Sino-French politics in Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn, this notion of segregation, as embodied in the classic conflict between Chinese concepts of health and European ideas of how a proper medical facility should be run, could be broadened to further include a discussion its discursive limits when the structure of French racial and bureaucratic division was momentarily shattered to resolve its own governing conundrum. In this last section of the chapter, I continue to demonstrate how Chinese-run institutions in Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn, particularly hospitals and medical facilities, not only brought to the fore critical debates that questioned French rigid, at times viewed by communities as “unjust”, legal precedents that directly impacted Chinese livelihood but also contributed to subsequent revisions of colonial ideology, practices, and approaches in the matter of public health. As shall be demonstrated in the 1943 bubonic plague that caught Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn off guard in mass hysteria and panic, the French authority deployed assistance from two Chinese hospitals to help shoulder their financial and over-capacity burden, ultimately leading to a merge with the existing French-patronized Chợ Quán Hospital to resolve the problem. When segregation could no longer sustain the social and political equilibrium, collaboration and compromise remained a practical reorientation to stay afloat in the middle of crisis.

***The Cantonese, Fujianese, Teochew and Hakkas Hospitals: Establishments and Colonial Politics (1907-1935)***

Given their active involvement in local politics and financial prowess, it was no surprise that Cantonese congregations trailblazed the establishments of Chinese hospitals in Chợ Lớn in the

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<sup>114</sup> Elizabeth Sinn, *Power and Charity: A Chinese Merchant Elite in Colonial Hong Kong*, Repr, (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Univ. Press, 2011), p. 3.

name of tending to community welfare and socio-medical protection. By 1909, it was reported that two Chinese hospitals were established with enthusiastic communities' support in Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn. The first hospital, under the tutelage of the Cantonese congregation and representing Cantonese interests, was first opened to the public in 1907. At the end of 1908, this Cantonese hospital, under the sponsorship of the Suizheng Congregation (Tuệ Thành Hội Quán 穗城會館) claimed to have received and treated 710 cases. The second hospital that begun to operate in May 1909 was later established by the Hokkien Chinese who belonged to the Fujian congregation. The *Courrier Saïgonnais* provided a comprehensive description of this new hospital, calling it “tastefully and lavishly furnished” which included forty rooms and two wide and lofty halls in service for patients. Those with infectious diseases would be kept isolated in six special rooms. The hospital was supplied with abundant water sources and provision of electric installations for modern equipment.<sup>115</sup> The constructions of these modern and well-organized hospitals, according to a French report, was owing to the outflowing financial support from philanthropic initiatives and fund-raising campaigns from wealthy and influential Chợ Lớn's Chinese donors. With the facilitation of Chinese congregations, which traditionally served as the political intermediaries with the French government since their inceptions, charitable funds were set up and quickly utilized to meet the growing expenses of staff recruitments, facility maintenance, and medical treatments for respective Chinese sub-communities.<sup>116</sup>

Apart from their seemingly favorable beginning with sizeable budgets mobilized from local Chinese donors whose concerns about community welfares motivated their contributions, Chinese hospitals emerged at a strange crossroads of French Westernized conceptions of modern medicine and practice—characterized by Laurence Monnais as the pharmaceutical turn in colonial medical

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<sup>115</sup> “Chinese Hospitals at Sài Gòn,” *The Straits Times*, 22 June 1909, NewspaperSG, NLB, p. 7.

<sup>116</sup> « L'Assistance Médicale en Indochine, » *La Dépêche Coloniale Illustrée*, 31 October 1907, p. 256, BNF.



discourses<sup>117</sup>—and traditional Chinese medicine, which was a persisting factor that attracted Chinese patients to Chinese-owned institutions. Such conventional appeal that made Chinese patients gravitate towards their own communities’ establishment, while administratively unbothered by French authority in common times, would turn disturbing when episodes of cholera epidemics and bubonic plagues began to impact public health consensus regarding what constituted medical propriety. A similar situation could be historically observed, again, in the case of the Tung Wah Hospital in Hong Kong. As Sinn points out, the 1894 pandemic generated a crisis of British governance and reoriented the hospital’s medical approaches in the later periods. British fear of the plague led to extreme exclusionary health measures, resulting in a bitter confrontation between its forced modernization schemes and the Chinese hospital’s organizational board. Viewed as “out of bound with Western medicine,” Tung Wah was forced to undergo British-initiated medical reforms and renegotiated with many of its conventional practices.<sup>118</sup>

The abovementioned Fujianese hospital, built in 1909 in Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn, was a case in point. While the precise identity of this establishment including its origins and board members remained in obscurity in the French records, we can fortunately gather some of these additional information in certain Vietnamese and Chinese sources. In early 1909, a management board comprised of fifteen prominent Chinese merchants, notables, and community leaders in the Fujian community pool-funded to found a hospital, named Phúc Thiện (富善醫院), in Chợ Lớn. One of its directors and chairman, Cai Chenshi (Thái Trần Thạch 蔡陳石), was a reputable businessman who migrated from Tong-An county of Fujian province in China and owned a chain of grocery shops popular among French colonist circles. Cai, typical of a Francophile Chinese, was fluent in the

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<sup>117</sup> Laurence Monnais and Noémi Tousignant, *The Colonial Life of Pharmaceuticals: Medicines and Modernity in Vietnam*, Global Health Histories (Cambridge, UK; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

<sup>118</sup> Sinn, *Power and Charity*. See particularly chapters 6 and 7, pp. 159-208.

French language and had the upper hand in accessing the political and economic benefits only afforded by those acquainted with French colonial networks. Indeed, by 1928, at a mere age of twenty-seven, Cai put his name on the map by successfully setting up the Tân Chấn Phát (新振發) export and import company, a remarkable feat amidst fierce competitions as a result of French protectionism and the dominated market share of European shipping firms at the Sài Gòn port.<sup>119</sup> But Cai also derived much of his prestige from active social engagement and large-scale community advocacy, especially in critical initiatives that involved prolonged negotiations with the French. In addition to being the vice-chairman of the Lycée Franco-Chinois and vice-president-elect of the Fujianese congregation of Sài Gòn, Cai directed various medical efforts, rooted in traditional Chinese medicine and community's interests, to be led by the Phúc Thiện hospital. During this time period, as scholar Grace Chew Chye Lay indicates, the spacious hospital, while popular for its traditional approaches that catered to Fujian-Chinese preferences, provided free-of-charge diagnoses and treatments and was able to accommodate an average of eighty warding patients on a daily basis.<sup>120</sup>

The Great Depression and the multiple eruptions of infectious diseases during and after World War II exerted a major impact on the Phúc Thiện Hospital. The financial struggles of Chinese businesses, disruption of international shipping that slowed down commercial exchanges, and an uncontrolled spread of cholera and beriberi put paramount pressure on the hospital to swiftly respond to these dire situations in Chợ Lớn when rising death tolls created an opportunity for Western medicine to penetrate its existing operational structure. Not only that, the hospital was

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<sup>119</sup> Shi Ren Hua (Cai Chenshi), *Huaqiao Xiehui Zonghui Bian* 華僑協會總會編, "Huaqiao Mingren Chuan Xuji 華僑名人傳續集," (Taibei: Liming Wenhua Xueyue Gufen Youxiang Gongsi, 1987), p. 268-73.

<sup>120</sup> Grace Chew Chye Lay, see entry on Thái Trần Thạch 蔡陳石, pp. 1160-1162 in Leo Suryadinata eds., *Southeast Asian Personalities of Chinese Descent: A Biographical Dictionary* (Singapore: Chinese Heritage Center : Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2012).

also compelled to respond to the public health impulses of the French colonial state, which, even before the epidemic, had systematically trained a generation of doctors and medical staff under the pillar of Western medical pedagogy at the Hà Nội College of Medicine. French medical administrators had rejected any semblance of Chinese practices in their own hospital. In 1889, for example, the director of Chợ Quán Hospital refused to employ an Annamite subject named Nguyễn Văn Học, a government nominee, on the speculative ground that his training in pharmacy was insufficient and that he practiced “oriental” medicine, thus demanding someone with more pharmaceutically grounded experiences.<sup>121</sup> As a matter of fact, the Fujian hospital began to incorporate Western medicine starting in 1946 so that it could effectively cope with the swiftly evolving situations during the plague.

While their Cantonese and Fujianese neighbors were setting up hospitals to serve their communities, the Teochew Chinese (Triều Châu in Vietnamese), highlighting the lack of a comparable establishment as their disadvantage and backwardness, asked the colonial government for permission to open a Teochew Hospital in Chợ Lớn. In 1915, Tiết Hưng Lợi 傑興俐, the president of the Teochew congregation, made such a motion to the governor-general of Cochinchina. A series of correspondences between this persistent community leader and French administrators revealed that this request was not received with immediate enthusiasm and advocacy from the colonial government. The governor-general reacted to the Teochew initiatives, which included the utilization of a rather large tract of land along a lower road and the transformation of this zone into a hospital to serve the communities that settled in this space, with utmost doubts. For one, this proposed area seemed undesirable because, as a French officer who

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<sup>121</sup> « M. Andre, Directeur de l'Hôpital de Chợ Quán a Monsieur le Lieutenant-Gouverneur de Cochinchine Sài Gòn, » GOUCOCH G.85 N5376, *Dossier Relatif Aux Difficultés Entre Médecins Attaches et le Directeur, a la Nomination d'un Pharmacien Indigène, a l'Evasion de Chinois Détenu et a l'Hospitalisation des Personnes Etrangères au Service à l'Hôpital de Chợ Quán, Année 1889*, TTLTQG-II, HCMC.

captured the prevalent sentiment of the colonial council vocally expressed, “this potential hospital is too close a proximity to the European neighborhood.”<sup>122</sup> The Teochew request was consequently denied due to a typical French concern of contagion that could plague the European enclave. Regardless of this refusal, congregational leaders persisted and made a second attempt by strategically picking a site that turned out to be a former congregational cemetery, but remained “a good distance away from French dwellings.”<sup>123</sup> The resourcefulness of Chinese leaders, consistent petitions, and their perceptiveness to French governing mentality in this very situation were indicative of an inherent contradiction in colonial ideology: as long as the French neighborhood remained unexposed to “dangerous contagions,” Chinese initiative, despite being erected on the ground of a cemetery that epitomized colonial fear of epidemics, bore no significant threats. As a result, the Teochew’s second attempt did not go to waste. The newly proposed area shifted the colonial opinion as a letter from the president of Chợ Lớn’s municipal commission indicated, “the land now in sight is very well-situated for the establishment of this kind; it now lies in a district considerably far removed from any European home.”<sup>124</sup> As a result, the authorization request was granted to this Chinese community on August 26, 1915 in a decree dictating that the construction and development of this hospital needed to be subject to the supervision of the colonial board of public health and a European doctor exclusively approved by the municipal commission. Without surprise, the Teochew congregation would bear all the affiliated costs—doctor’s indemnities and extra-administrative measures—required to meet French requirements.

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid. « Monsieur L’Helgouale a M. Gouverneur-General de la Cochinchine. »

<sup>123</sup> « Chef de Congrégation de Teochew de Chợ Lớn a Gouverneur-General de la Cochinchine, » GOUCOCH S.19 N5519, *Dossier Relatif à l’Autorisation à la Congrégation de Trieu-Chau d’édifier un Hôpital Chinois à Chợ Lớn Année 1915*, TTLTQG-II, HCMC.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.



**Figure 12:** Hôpital de Fou-Kien (Fujian Congregation's Phước Thiện Hospital)

*Source: Manh Hai's Collection of Historic Photos*

In 1925, following this wave of Chinese-led initiatives to open new hospitals in the Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn region, the Hakka congregation mobilized financial contributions from Chinese donors and their members to construct a Hakka hospital. Often overshadowed by other dialect groups in Cochinchina, the Hakka Chinese, although having migrated to southern Vietnam as early as the nineteenth century, did not develop any associational organizations during this period with the exception of a temple, the Qunbin Huiguan (群賓會館), that worshipped the goddess of the sea Mazu (媽祖). This belated developmental trajectory was due to not only the comparatively smaller size of its community but also to their overlapping Guangdong origin with the Teochew whose extensive presence in the urban development of the colonial city meant that earlier Hakka migrants would receive social support under the auspice of Teochew institutions. However, this co-shared system would soon undergo a drastic structural change that resulted in a Teochew-Hakka split in

1918 when an internal conflict, driven partly by an intensified Hakka sense of identity and financial disputes, arose.<sup>125</sup> As a consequence, previously a member of the Teochew Nghĩa An Association (議案會館), the Hakka left in that same year and created their own congregation called Sùng Chính (崇正會館), which then became the official organization that represented Hakka interests and sponsored important community initiatives, including the establishment of a hospital in Chợ Lớn.

This hospital, officially granted authorization to be open to business by the colonial government in December 1926, faced a different set of challenges than those previously confronted by either the Teochew or Cantonese congregations. A close examination of these unfolding obstacles and Chinese involvement, again, revealed the dynamic interactions and shifting politics of Sino-French relations. First, the construction of this hospital and its coming into existence reinforced a common pattern of Chinese elite activism prevalent in Cochinchina at the time. Its board of trustees, those at the helm of this project who maintained direct communication with the French government, included a few prominent business tycoons and political leaders of Hakka descent: Tan Kim York, general director of the Indochina's Importation and Exportation Firm; Edouard Nammee, the Hong Kong comprador and president of the Shanghai Banking Corporation in Sài Gòn; and three regional Hakka congregation leaders, Lý-Phát of Gia Định, Trương-Khôi of Sài Gòn, and Từ-Nhuận of Chợ Lớn. Together, this trustee board built a modern hospital located at Boulevard Gallieni in the Chợ Quán district. According to a colonial report, this hospital was designed in accordance with European modern principles with "well-ventilated and well-lit patients' lounges" and "many isolation rooms for cases of contagious diseases."<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Kawai Hironao and Wu Yunxia, "The construction of a Sacred Landscape by the Hakka in Southern Vietnam," in Min Han, Hironao Kawai, and Heung Wah Wong, eds., *Family, Ethnicity and State in Chinese Culture under the Impact of Globalization* (Encino: Bridge21, 2017), p. 325.

<sup>126</sup> « Le Président de la Commission Municipale de Chợ Lớn à Monsieur le Gouverneur de la Cochinchine, » GOUCOCH S.19 N32031, *Dossier Relatif à l'Hôpital de la Congrégation de Hakkas à Sài Gòn et à Chợ Lớn Année 1928*, TTLTQG-II, HCMC.

Despite meeting French strict hygienic requirements imposed on earlier Chinese hospitals, the Hakka establishment's service was barred from opening to the public for almost a year due to French abrupt double-down on a new legal and medical legislation that further delayed this process. The first impediment emerged in the domain of essential compromises to be made between Chinese and Western medicines. Colonial administrators, citing a report made by a medical adviser from Paris who randomly visited a Chợ Lớn hospital during an investigative trip to Sài Gòn, resented what they described as "the presence of Chinese doctors who lacked the empirical trainings provided by French pedagogy and therefore armed with defective knowledge of modern methods."<sup>127</sup> However, to neutralize community's resistance and respond to Chinese exhortation to make the hospital immediately serviceable, the French authority carefully placed a French doctor side by side with Chinese doctors who practiced traditional medicine to mitigate public concerns, assuring that this would be a necessary administrative compromise should the board of trustees wanted to proceed to operating this hospital.<sup>128</sup> Second, Chinese leaders, in disputing French bureaucratic delays, also exercised their privileges and political connections to press the municipal French government into altering their legal status with regards to property ownership in the colony. They did this by sidestepping a colonial legal precedent that excluded Chinese merchants from land-ownership and demanding to borrow a 40,000-piastre loan as a mortgage repayable in four years, a move that was initially frowned upon by the governor general.<sup>129</sup> On November 13, 1926, Barthélemy Gazano, the president of Chợ Lớn's municipal commission, in a

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<sup>127</sup> « Le Président de la Commission Municipale de Chợ Lớn a Chef de Congrégation de Canton, » July 9, 1924, GOUCOCH S.19 N32031, TTLTQG-II, HCMC.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> « Le Chef de la Congrégation de Hakka de Sài Gòn à Monsieur Le Gouvernement de la Cochinchine, » May 5 1925, GOUCOCH S.19 N32031, TTLTQG-II, HCMC.

letter to the governor of Cochinchina, conceded to the Hakka congregation's request and granted them the permission to open their hospital.

Inspired by the case of the Hakka hospital, debates over the legal nature of Chinese hospitals in the colony and French treatments of these establishments continued to grip Sino-French relations and animate colonial concerns in the 1931-1934 period. Rather than merely preoccupied with a self-proclaimed superiority of Western medical sciences and the reorganization of the colonial health corps, the French's fixation on the jurisdictional statuses of Chinese hospitals further reflected not only the urge to consolidate its biopolitical regime that sought to discipline and regulate the "health" of its subjects but also an intensified effort to strengthen colonial governance in the interest of maintaining a stable legal structure grounded in economic and "rights to property" issues. Chinese entanglement in these back-and-forth exchanges also affirmed the degree of political and economic interdependency that defined their relationship. As Tracy Barrett has noted, the surge in congregational requests to establish private and independently run hospitals to service distinct communities overwhelmed the colonial office, which instilled a centralizing impulse and more proactive regulation on the side of the administration.<sup>130</sup> As a matter of fact, during this period, colonial legal discourses shifted their attention to the legal capacity of Chinese congregations to own immobile properties upon which hospitals were erected and to direct their medical programs with or without French directives.

The colonial determination to remove Chinese "property-owning" rights and convert their possessions into charitable associations was twofold. First, by redefining Chinese hospitals in the legal framework of public institutions or as they called it "civil entity," French administrators were able to subject their operations and initiatives to the collective supervisory role of the Office of

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<sup>130</sup> Barrett, *The Chinese Diaspora in Southeast Asia*, pp. 101-103.



Health and Sanitation, which dictated doctor training and recruitments, and on-the-ground health campaigns in the Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn region, hence putting an end to the “irregularity” of existing medical practices. Second, ridding Chinese hospitals of their private characters was an essential coping mechanism, critical to the sustenance of imperial statecraft, to manage the economic anxiety of a flailing colonial state whose too much commercial interest was deeply tied to Chinese capital. This became a matter of legal obligations to the French when, during the years preceding the 1934 economic depression, the failure of Chinese businesses had led to unclaimed debts and governmental inability to seize assets in the name of public property. Such was the case of two Chinese, Lư Châm and Phan Minh, whose notorious bankruptcy in 1923 led to a lasting Sino-French dispute over a 140,000 piastre in immovable assets. The legal victory of Chinese congregations at the Sài Gòn court, which then enabled Chinese congregations to auction out these immovables, alarmed the French administration of its own legal loopholes.<sup>131</sup> Regarding the status of Chinese hospital, for this reason, a colonial officer exasperatedly concluded that “congregational autonomy and independence of authority for all acts of civil life are repugnant to our French conceptions...how can a civil entity lacking legal public responsibilities freely form a mass of real estate?”<sup>132</sup>

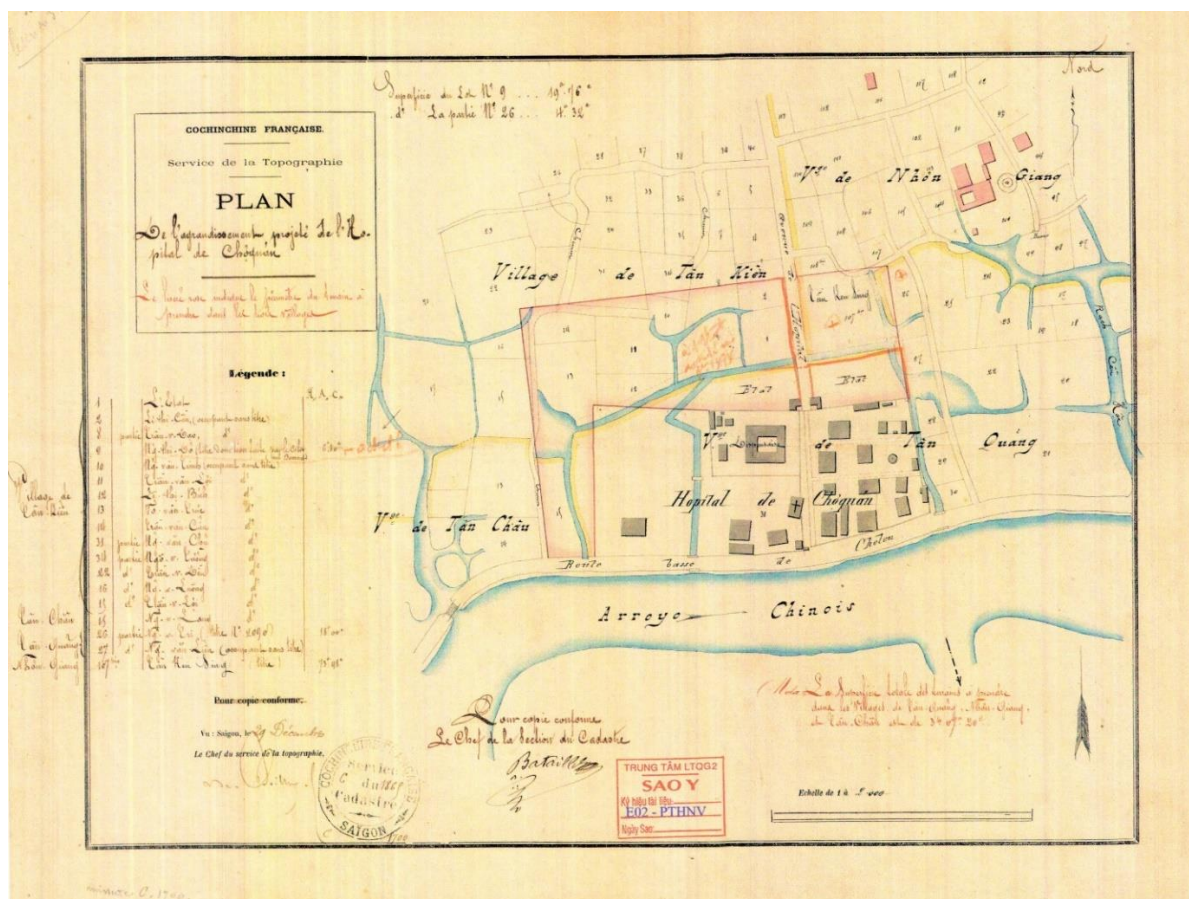
On May 23, 1934, in response to political grievances from the Administrator of Civil Services in Chợ Lớn, the head of Indochinese Property Department declared all four existing Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn’s Chinese hospitals respectively run by the Cantonese, Fujian, Teochew, and Hakka congregations to be public properties of the colonial state. Chinese congregations could only maintain their lawful capacities to administer their members’ contributions, the premises for their

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<sup>131</sup> « Au Sujet de la Capacité Juridique des Congrégations Asiatiques de Leur Aptitude à être Propriétaires d’Immeubles, » GOUCOCH S.19 N7154, *Dossier Relatif Aux Renseignements Sur la Création des Hôpitaux Chinois à Chợ Lớn Années 1931-1934*, TTLTQG-II, HCMC.

<sup>132</sup> Correspondence, 13 October 1930, GOUCOCH S.19 N7154, TTLTQG-II, HCMC.

administration and regular meetings, and constructions necessary for the accomplishments of the hospitals' purposes.<sup>133</sup> Such a political move, without a doubt, paved the way for a more direct and radical effort to integrate Chinese hospitals into the broader networks of the colonial healthcare system in the subsequent periods. However, Chinese acquiescence to colonial regulations was by no means a streamlined phenomenon of modernity *par excellence*. On the contrary, historical exigency, combined with the internal limitations of colonial rule, resulted in much-needed political compromises between Chinese communities and the French government when a cholera outbreak beset the colonial healthcare system in 1943.



**Figure 13:** A Planning Sketch of the Chợ Quán Hospital, c. 1868  
Source: Vietnam National Archive Center II, Ho Chi Minh City

<sup>133</sup> « Du Chef du Service de la Propriété Foncière en Indochine au Sujet de l'Immatriculation de l'Hôpital Chinois à Chợ Lớn, » 23 May 1934, GOUCOCH S.19 N7154, TTLTQG-II, HCMC.

***The Requisition: Collaboration in Time of Epidemics and the Limits of French Governance (1943-1945)***

The 1940s was a particularly challenging period for French colonial governance in Indochina. This period, what I call a critical interval of inter-dialect group collaborations within the Chinese communities, was characterized by a non-sectarian approach to medical treatments and intensifying colonial effort to coopt Chinese premises to manage its own deficiency. While requests to open up specific dialect-based hospitals and their rationales in previous years hinted at a degree of distinction among these Chinese groups with which each congregational hospitals admitted exclusive patients from their associations, the sudden outbreak of a bubonic plague in Chợ Lớn in 1943 and French inability to curb the spread meant that such divided mode of operation was no longer viable. In the midst of crisis, French hospitals that treated Europeans and Vietnamese native were themselves overwhelmed by increasing admission rates, leading the colonial administrators to negotiate with Chinese health institutions for “essential” requisitions. The apparent goal of such political move, conveniently building on the previous legal foundation subjecting Chinese hospitals to a civil public status, was a pragmatic and deliberate, if not indispensable choice to respond to this pandemic whose effective control required increased number of hospital beds, expansive medical facilities, and extra spaces for the isolation of infected patients. The French could not do this alone; through legal and political compromises conditioned by the exigency of the dire moment, Chinese community leaders worked with French administrators to manage the public health crisis.

On May 12, 1943, the chief medical inspector and director of local hygiene in Cochinchina informed the governor-general of a recurrent public health crisis facing the colony. A bubonic plague was currently spreading too quickly in the Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn area. French hospitals deployed a well-equipped medical taskforce to conduct immediate screening and coordinate

prophylaxis among local health services as they strived to control the infections. Such intensive effort led to a massive quarantine campaign wherein people who had been in immediate contact with those infected would be isolated for observations over nine to ten days. A sudden rise in the number of cases of infected patients had overwhelmed the capacity of French hospitals. Report from the Chợ Quán Hospital indicated that its premises had always been filled up with patients, which exceeded more than 50 cases on a daily basis and left the ability to treat and quarantine effectively insufficient. According to an epidemiological report on the situation in Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn, medical experts, Hérivaux and Toumanoff, assessed the 1943 plague to be the most widespread and serious outburst in Cochinchina since the disease first appeared in the colony in 1906. This was, as this elaborate study indicated, due not only to the “agglomeration of Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn’s inhabitants that reached 500,000 people by that same year and increased urban density” but also to the “extraordinary unhealthiness of crowding enclaves within the city.” This French study then discussed the impossibility of correctly identifying a verifiable plague spot in Chợ Lớn because of the concentration of 150,000 people huddling together in approximately 20,000 huts in close proximity to one another.<sup>134</sup> An unfortunate fire that burnt down two adjoining Chinese huts in Chợ Lớn in the preceding year 1942, as epidemiological tracing demonstrated, led to disorder, and panic, hence initiating new clusters of transmission.

As the plague brought about a shockwave that challenged the colonial healthcare system, the chief inspector of public health, representing French doctors, propositioned to the Governor-General a novel idea of “requesting a concession of the Chinese Hakka Hospital to the colonial

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<sup>134</sup> A. Hérivaux and C. Toumanoff, « Epidémiologie de la Peste à Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn (1943), L’étude de la Faune Pulicidienne des Rats dans ses Rapports avec la Transmission de la Peste, » *Bulletin de la Société de Pathologie Exotique*, Vol. 41, Séances des 14 Janvier et 11 Février 1948, p. 47-59.

government.”<sup>135</sup> This administrator contended that the close distance of this hospital to existing Chợ Quán premise, facilitated by its four buildings that accommodated additional 40 to 60 beds, would be extremely favorable for French public health imperatives. Not only that, to make room for such initiative, this French official suggested other Chinese congregations, including the Cantonese, Fujianese, and Teochew, to consider expanding on their care apparatuses by temporarily accepting patients from the Hakka Hospital. The board of public health urged the colonial authority to facilitate congregational arrangements to allow such new medical approach to materialize. In addition to now being attached to the Chợ Quán Hospital, the Hakka Hospital would be required to undergo drastic infrastructural and medical transformations to meet French hygienic standards. Undoubtably, the epidemic, alongside its medical imperatives that demanded excessive measures to be managed, provided the colonial government with the opportunities to intervened in existing Chinese autonomous features of their own healthcare systems. As a result, French occupation of the Hakka hospital did not come without a prejudiced view of its physical conditions and functionalities. In the name of urgency, the board of sanitation requested the Hakka hospital staff to work under the supervision of Chợ Quán nursing and medical personnel while installing six coolies to carry out a massive renovation and sterilization project, including room maintenance and cleansing of courtyards and gardens during the period of requisition.<sup>136</sup> On May 13, 1943, an official order of requisition was directed to the Hakka Hospital board of trustees. An adjoining health facility, created and facilitated by Chợ Quán’s medical professionals, would be used for the observation and possible treatments of patients suspected of being infected by the bubonic plague, an epidemic then troubling the Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn region. The Governor General

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<sup>135</sup> «Le Médecin Inspecteur des T.C. Cautron, Directeur Local de la Sante en Cochinchine à Monsieur le Gouverneur de la Cochinchine, » GOUCOCH Q.29 N51879, *Dossier Relatif à la Réquisition des Hôpitaux Chinois de Hakkas, de la Congrégation des Hakkas année 1943-1944*, 12 May 1943, TTLTQG-II, HCMC.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

of Cochinchina provided logistical guidance on this matter, insisting that this necessary transition could not be achieved without attending to the “poor state of the buildings there and the degradation of their properties” as well as completing vital sanitization procedures including “complete bleaching with lime and leaching of all doors and windows.”<sup>137</sup>

Administrative resistance delayed the requisition process when news of French ordinance first reached the hospital board. On the one hand, evacuating patients to another Chinese hospitals that belonged to different Chinese congregations was not an easy procedure that could take place overnight, thus requiring additional time and sustained negotiations. On the other hand, while Chinese leaders were aware of the seriousness of the epidemic, the Hakka hospital’s board of trustee, as previously noted, consisted of prominent Chinese personalities with important economic and political stakes in Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn. The French’s drastic health measure that required efficient merging with its existing institution needed to address these deep-seated concerns that they expressed either through political compromises or necessary compensations. As a matter of fact, a local health inspector and the head of the civil construction reported the on-the-ground difficulties with accelerating essential construction and evacuation works largely owing to their inability to “persuade Chinese leaders to conclude their negotiation process with other premises in the city.”<sup>138</sup> Urgent procedures, rooted in a modernizing rhetoric, that entailed plaster fittings, gutter renovation, lavatory cleaning, leaching of joinery, and sanitization of all beddings could not be set into motion without the facilitation of Chinese institutions. Meanwhile, French intelligence report on the existence of cholera and bubonic plague in neighboring regions such as southern

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<sup>137</sup> « Gouverneur de la Cochinchine à Monsieur le Chef du Service des Bâtiments Civils, » GOUCOCH Q.29 N51879, TTLTQG-II, HCMC.

<sup>138</sup> « L’Architecte Hors Classe, Chef de l’arrondissement des Bâtiments Civils à Monsieur le Gouverneur de la Cochinchine, » GOUCOCH Q.29 N51879, 14 May 1943, TTLTQG-II, HCMC.

China, Thailand, and Cambodia did not help alleviate the hot situation, rendering requisition an obligatory measure to fight potential outbreaks in Cochinchina.<sup>139</sup>

What the French officials failed to consider was that Chinese hospitals among different sub-dialect groups were already spearheading their own initiatives to cope with the pressure of the moment, which had seen not only soaring death tolls in the densely populated neighborhoods of Chợ Lớn but also a detrimental blow to Chinese businesses. The pressing need of medicines and medical facilities to treat those infected within the communities had led to Chinese hospitals' flexible and wide-ranging adaption of Western medicine to their treatment plans and a temporary agreement to consider the French proposal of this requisition. To overcome the lack of isolated space and the necessity to keep infections away from general patients, owners of traditional Chinese medicinal establishments stepped in and made donations to Chinese preventive effort. Such was the case of the famed medical hall Nhị Thiên Đường (二天堂藥行) whose owner gifted the Guangzhao Hospital two large tents so that it could manage proper isolation and treatments for Chinese patients. Five Chinese dialect groups—Cantonese, Fujianese, Teochew, Hainanese, and Hakka—took turn administering these controlled and separated area using Western medicine. In fact, the first Western-styled Chinese hospital, the Trung Hoa Western Hospital (中華西醫院), which came about as a result of an inter-congregational effort, was borne out of this collaboration. It should be noted that, by this point, the Hakka Hospital had actively and simultaneously worked with French administrators to figure out necessary pre-conditions if the merge was indeed to happen. Toward the end of 1943 and early 1944, Trương Thành and Lưu Vinh, two leaders of the Hakka Congregations in Sài Gòn and Chợ Lớn respectively, expressed their willingness to accept French proposition on the only condition that both congregations would receive a provisional

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<sup>139</sup> « Le Médecin-Inspecteur des T.C. Gautron, Directeur Local de la Sante en Cochinchine a Monsieur le Gouverneur de la Cochinchine, » GOUCOCH Q.29 N51879, 13 October 1943, TTLTQG-II, HCMC.

restitution and proper compensation for their public service. To pacify Chinese financial and legal anxieties, French administrators assured these congregational leaders that this measure had been “dictated purely by imperative public health considerations.” While politely declining their requests for a sum of direct compensation due to French double need to increase the current capacity of municipal health facilities and the reconstruction of Chợ Quán Hospital, the Governor General assured Chinese leaders that “the lasting prejudice that will be caused to your congregations by the annexation decision of the Hakka Hospital shall not be escaped by the department of civil services” and that “promises of fair compensation and an eventual surrender of land replacement are in the working.”<sup>140</sup>

## Conclusion

From education, charity and hospitals to management of dead bodies and funerary practices, this chapter captures how Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn’s Chinese communities dabbled in a complex, ethnically plural space that defied any streamlined narratives of positive cosmopolitanism, thus foregrounding the oft-accompanied tension and conflicts emblematic of inter-ethnic interactions in a colonial port city. Chinese livelihood, sociocultural institutions, and political agency were defined (and constrained) as much by transnational vectors of power as by local colonial governance whose visions of political and economic *mise en valeur*, inseparable from Chinese diasporic politics and community-building, necessitated French implementation of various policies to effectively co-exist with and ultimately control this population. Chinese experiences with colonial modernity, be it in their collaborations, resistances, or negotiations with the French colonial state epitomized a diverse, multi-layered canvass of social and political interactions. Such

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<sup>140</sup> « Le Gouverneur du la Cochinchine à Messieurs Truong Thanh et Luu Vinh, Chefs des Congrégations d’Hakkas de Chợ Lớn et de Sài Gòn, » GOUCOCH Q.29 N51879, 19 October 1943, TTLTQG-II, HCMC.



irreducible diversity and non-essentialized character of Chinese communities' relationship to the French were contingent upon what historian Shelly Chan theorized as “diaspora moments”—a series of temporal rupture, transformation, and recombination—<sup>141</sup> that conditioned and shifted communities' approaches to navigate the treacherous water of colonial life.

The emergence of Indochina's Franco-Chinese policy, embodied in the establishment of the Lycée Franco-Chinois in Chợ Lớn at the turn of the twentieth century, represent a first critical phase of political and economic convergence that elevated the importance of Chinese education in Cochinchina. French wariness of late-Qing modernization reforms, overseas Chinese nationalism, and the rise of republican and revolutionary politics in China intersected with local Chinese notables' elite activism to maintain their status in the colonial society to warrant the making of a Franco-Chinese high school a political and cultural *sine qua non* in advancing French interests in Asia. The indispensability of such Franco-Chinese institutions was further reinforced in another Franco-Chinese collaborative effort to keep it from going bankrupt when the financial lifeblood that fueled its life—Chinese capital and donations—was disrupted because of a prolonged economic recess. Nevertheless, the collaboration and resistance dichotomy proved to be theoretically futile in encapsulating the evolving nature of Chinese interactions with the colonial state at different moments in time.

The contingency of Chinese diasporic politics remained evidently manifest in how communities dealt with the French disruption of Chinese mobility, autonomy, and normative practices, which included Chinese initiatives to repatriate the remains of their compatriots to Hong Kong and to establish Chinese-run hospitals in Chợ Lớn. As for the former, while the Cantonese congregation leaders did not wholly succeed in contesting the French biopolitical regime due to

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<sup>141</sup> Shelly Chan, *Diaspora's Homeland: Modern China in the Age of Global Migration* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).

its irrational and self-contradictory fear of unhygienic contaminations, their political activism was not entirely futile. Through persistent negotiations and strategic political mobilization, they managed to question French imposed formalities upon their customs, viewing its rigorous implementations of coffin materials and “rational”, modern procedures as an attack on existing Chinese mobility. In the case of the latter, as demonstrated, Chinese communities proved themselves to be an essential, flexible, and adaptive player in the Franco-Chinese equation. Chinese hospitals, for a time, maintained their utmost statuses as symbols of community-driven and autonomous initiatives conducive to the welfare of the Chinese diasporas not only in Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn, but also in the larger Sinosphere. Even with the penetration of Western medicine and medical procedures, Chinese hospitals provided a crucial infrastructural foundation and essential healthcare to a struggling colonial state in the middle of a global pandemic.

Colonial Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn and French Cochinchina, as inter-ethnic regions and “space of possibilities”, remained a breeding ground for the experimentation and implementation of modernity. Filled with contradictions and colonial anxieties over external political threats, public hygiene, and dead bodies, the cosmopolitan city also became a hotbed of tension, reflecting the ever-increasing challenge of colonial governance, specifically in response to the perceived dangers of its mobile subjects, Chinese migrants with a long lineage of networked capital, kinship, and sociopolitical institutions in Southeast Asia. The unique situation of Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn not only as a predominantly Chinese town but also as a midpoint between southern China and the rest of the Nanyang diasporic sphere, whether in trans-regional commerce, migration, or global capitalism, had intensified French struggle over the colonial ability to surveil and control of Chinese quotidian activities, both within and beyond colonial Vietnam.

In the historiography of modern Vietnam, anti-colonial nationalism has dominated the studies of colonial politics, thus downplaying a diversity of multiethnic interactions within colonial societies and their multitudinous possibilities of historical imaginations. A close examination of Chinese interactions with the French government, utilizing the Sino-French-Vietnamese archive, reveals quite the opposite; Chinese involvement in colonial ideology and their reshaping of its practices was instrumental to a renewed understanding of urban Sài Gòn history and colonialism at large. As a methodological corollary, Chinese responses to French ideology of the politico-scientific “modern” through its comprehensive institutionalization of social engineering and public health illuminates the agential domain in which communities exercised over the assumed hegemony of colonial and nationalist discourses as well as the limitations of French ideology in time of crisis. And lastly, these specific instances of shifting Chinese political dispositions and transformations within the purview of French colonial discourses forces us to be vigilant of a claim to essential collaborationism in theorizing the relationship between this migrant community and the French colonial government. As this chapter again insists, this relationship was far from definitive and fraught with ambiguities and situational contradictions.

## **CONCLUSION**

### **Chinese Networks, Inter-Ethnic Interactions, and the Transformations of French Rule**

Triangulating a variety of historical records—French colonial administrative documents and periodicals, Vietnamese and Chinese newspapers, British sources in colonial Singapore, this dissertation demonstrates the global and local confluences that enabled the Chinese in Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn to become indispensable agents in French modernizing projects. In the commercial domains, the Straits Chinese and Nanyang connections not only brought Chinese economic institutions in Vietnam into contact with a global network of commerce, but also gave rise to some of the most powerful Chinese intermediaries that, through forging local connections and intimate relationship to the colonial state, reshaped the landscape of colonial economic development in southern Vietnam around this time. Beyond economics, Chinese cultural and community networks played equally important roles. In the case of Chinese education in colonial Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn, Chinese merchant elites took advantage of French shifting attitudes toward colonization in the event of Franco-Vietnamese collaboration and channeled their resources into the construction of one of the most long-standing French-patronized Chinese high school in Vietnam, the Lycée Franco-Chinois—an institution that stood proudly as a symbol of Chinese wealth and French benevolent facilitation. This high school also remained at its core an inter-imperial project, motivated by French concerns about maintaining the legitimacy of its rule in a transnational Chinese world continually shaped by the Chinese revolution and seismic ruptures in global imperialism.

Additionally, the core chapters also reveal how the fluidity of Chinese diasporic networks virtually linked Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn to colonial port cities including Singapore and Hong Kong,

contributing to its emergence as a prominent node of commerce in maritime Southeast Asia. At the same time, they also show how these crisscrossing networks and interactions with colonists reoriented colonial regulations and policies. As we have seen in the case study of the colonial immigration policing regime, the increasing movements of Chinese migrants through the Sài Gòn port by the late nineteenth century had a double-sided effect on colonial politics. On the one hand, some French colonists were reserved about this upward mobility trend and took on an exclusionist approach, fearing that “swarms of Chinese migrants” would exacerbate existing Chinese predominance. On the other hand, a different colonial faction recognized incoming migrants’ economic potentials as a productive labor force although it tended to justify the need for immigration in a deeply racialized manner. A French colonist, commenting on this situation, even went so far to state that “we won’t need to fear the state of mind of the Chinese in that they will push our subjects [Vietnamese] to revolt against France because the Chinese have the deepest contempt for other Asians and are too selfish to care about others, be they Annamites or Cambodians.”<sup>1</sup> Racist colonial attitudes ultimately shaped the creation of an inherently problematic poll tax program that tried hard, often against the awareness of colonial administrators, to impose indiscriminate taxations on Chinese communities, a move that angered rich and poor Chinese alike and undermined original colonial intentions. In the face of unceasing oppositions, the colonial state became more careful and reflexive in devising a new central regulatory regime to police Chinese movements. This study of Chinese migration in colonial Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn and Vietnam at large thus further elucidates new modes of conceptualizing French colonial statecraft, showing their limitations, confusion, and malleability in the face of an influential diaspora. In this

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<sup>1</sup> “Les Chinois en Indochine,” *La Revue Economique de Extrême-Orient*, 5 Septembre, 1927. Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

manner, my study, while focusing on urban Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn, hopes to provide new perspectives to the larger global history of inter-Asian mobility and empire-building in Southeast Asia as well.

Lastly, this dissertation, as both a history of Chinese migrants and inter-ethnic relations, foregrounds the centrality of the triangular Franco-Chinese-Vietnamese encounter to a better understanding of the global forces shaping colonial politics. Scholars of modern and pre-modern Vietnamese history have effectively linked the expansive frontier expansion and commercial efflorescence in the southern region to the sedimentation of predominant Chinese migrant communities starting in the eighteenth century. Similarly, interdisciplinary research on the global Chinese diasporas in colonial Southeast Asia have produced an enormous literature that explained Chinese economic dominance, uncharted social mobility, and intimate relationship to the colonial states primarily in terms of ethnic capitalism or economic modernity. But very few have elaborated on the contributions of this migrant community to colonial politics, the inherent interconnectedness of their transnational networks across Asian port cities as well as their consequences for Vietnamese urban society. The Chinese rice trade transformed Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn into a center of colonial economic modernity while generating key moments of ethnic tension that challenged colonial governance. Transnational movements of Chinese repatriation efforts led to new debates and contestations in colonial public health regarding what constituted modern practices of hygiene. And, ultimately, Chinese communities, drawing on the financial resources and support from Hong Kong charitable organizations, constructed congregational hospitals and took the initiatives to provide community-oriented care against the encroachment of colonial public health institutions. Methodologically, taking into account these transnational dimensions means placing an analytical emphasis on Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn's Chinese communities as part of broader Nanyang migratory world and a conscious detachment from both a nation-centric and colonial meta-narrative,

achievable not only by a critical reading of the colonial records and engaging with textual materials beyond Vietnam but also by a different approach to periodization that highlights key moments of interactions and encounters.

### **Historicizing Sino-Vietnamese Relations: A Preliminary Ruminations on Anti-Chinese Nationalism, the Political Economy, and Post-1919 Vietnam**

In the scorching months of May and June 2018, a series of anti-Chinese protests rocked the Vietnamese nation. Occupying the streets of Ho Chi Minh City, protesters, numbering thousands, congregated in neighborhoods close to the city center and proudly waved affirmative slogans in reaction to a recent attempt by the Vietnam's National Assembly to pass a Special Economic Zone Act. The draft of this new law, feared by many Vietnamese citizens, will effectively establish three special economic zones for concession to China over 99 years and undermine Vietnamese sovereignty.<sup>2</sup>

This dissertation helps, in many ways, contextualize this modern encounter by showing that anti-Chinese protests and movements in Vietnam over the long course of its history were not wholly unprecedented. As detailed in the first chapter, a similarly massive boycott erupted in French Cochinchina, which traced its origin to a simple “coffee-cup” incident wherein a Chinese shop decided to increase the price of its coffee and unexpectedly unleashed waves of discontent and confrontation from the Indochinese public. However, what contemporary commentators often fail to factor in their discussion of Sino-Vietnamese relationship relates to what followed that period of intense boycotts and political contestation: a stream of trenchant intellectual critiques

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<sup>2</sup> *South China Morning Post*, “Anti-Chinese Protests in Vietnam Set to Aggravate Tension with Beijing,” <http://scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2150653/anti-china-protests-vietnam-set-aggravate-tensions>. Accessed on April 15, 2021.

that employed anti-Chinese rhetoric to caution Indochinese native against doing business with Chinese merchants and frequenting Chinese shops, which cohered around the collective goals of undermining Chinese economic power and resolving the problems facing the Vietnamese political economy. This form of what I call “anti-Chinese nationalism” which took a definitive shape in the context of burgeoning Chinese communities in the colony’s major port cities, occupied a crucial place in the larger genealogy of Vietnamese nationalism and Sino-Vietnamese interactions.

Even when the parallel from these two temporally distant incidents might seem like a cliché to some, I evoke it to demonstrate the centrality of the “*Chinese question*” to the formation of a Vietnamese intellectual landscape that, in the first half of the twentieth century, was to be enmeshed in a quest toward crystalizing national identities. The Chinese question here refers to specific Vietnamese discourses and debates on colonial economic development and, made emergent by the repercussions of the French colonial conquest, on the struggle over democratic modes of native governance and autonomous possibilities. The *Chinese question* turned into a particularly salient public concerns over national sovereignty and economic inequality as long-standing Chinese migration began to be perceived as a threat and colonial capitalism dramatically transformed the socioeconomic landscape of Vietnam. Recurring fear of Chinese mass-migration and settlement, land colonization, and monopolistic domination in the event of an increasingly complex and globalized political economy provided the opportunity for a minor yet highly influential segment of the Vietnamese educated public to wrestle with the state of its future growth and to reflect on the meaning of being a colonial subject. In short, the *Chinese question* emerged not simply a momentary rupture of anti-Chinese outrage—or “economic nationalism” as termed by Micheline Lessard in a recent study<sup>3</sup>—but also an articulate political project and a

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<sup>3</sup> Lessard, “‘Organisons-Nous!’ Racial Antagonism and Vietnamese Economic Nationalism in the Early Twentieth Century.”



systematically sophisticated reactions to the contradictions of colonial development: it is arguably the foundation upon which colonial modernity was redefined and contested.

This dissertation demonstrates how and why China—and by proxy, Chinese migrants—had been a perennial yardstick against which Vietnamese nationalism developed. Historians of Sino-Vietnamese relations have convincingly argued for the degree to which Vietnamese identities had been inextricably linked to the historical encounters with China, whether in the experience of Chinese colonization or shared Confucian statecraft and mode of governance.<sup>4</sup> However, as this study further argues, the Chinese presence during the colonial period and its relationship to the colonial state formed a crucial avenue in which intellectual debates on migration and the political economy became mainstream and dominated the public sphere. It shows how more nuanced perspectives on the Chinese roles in the political economy, the colonial conquest, as well as Vietnamese nation-building allow us to rethink Vietnamese intellectuals' understandings of the colonial society by resisting the static notion of unchanging resistance against French or Chinese invasion, and the analytical tendency to disassociate anti-Chineseness from the genealogy of the rise of Vietnamese nationalism.

In the pages that follow, I briefly lay out some further examples—predominantly Vietnamese writings on the problem of Chinese migration in Vietnam wherein thinking on the economy, colonial subjecthood, and perception of domination was grounded and influenced by central debates on Chinese migration and economic monopoly in the aftermath of the anti-Chinese boycott. This dissertation, following cultural theorist Kuan-Hsing Chen's dictum on the rendering of Asia

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<sup>4</sup> Alexander Woodside, *Vietnam and the Chinese Model: A Comparative Study of Vietnamese and Chinese Government in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century*, Harvard East Asian Monographs 140 (Cambridge, Mass: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University : Harvard University Press, 1988); Liam C. Kelley, *Beyond the Bronze Pillars: Envoy Poetry and the Sino-Vietnamese Relationship*, Asian Interactions and Comparisons (Honolulu: Association for Asian Studies : University of Hawaii Press, 2005); Kathlene Baldanza, *Ming China and Vietnam: Negotiating Borders in Early Modern Asia*, 2016.

as a frame of reference instead of submitting to the dyadic East-West dichotomy on the impulse of de-imperializing colonial history, emphasizes the need to focus our analytical energy on a different “other”—in this case, Chinese migrants in Vietnam—to productively inquire into the many facets of local contingencies and conditions that defined colonial relations.<sup>5</sup> Simply put, inter-Asian connections, and not just French colonialism vis-à-vis Vietnamese subjects, crucially configured intellectual discourses on the colonial economy and Vietnamese nationalism. They, therefore, provide the opportunity to reinvestigate the interactive, dynamic, and contingent nature of colonialism that transcends the narrow hegemonic/subjugated framework, often obscuring the transformative impacts that Sino-Vietnamese relations exerted upon the making of both colonial and contemporary Vietnam.

The impacts of French colonial capitalism and the shifting dimensions of Indochinese territorial landscape could be vividly seen in intellectuals’ meticulous descriptions in travelogues. The constitutional monarch and ambitious modernizer Phạm Quỳnh recalled his sojourn to southern Vietnam from the North in a serialized op-ed on the newspapers *Nam Phong* (Southern Wind) in 1918 and 1919 with awe, the excitement of discovery, and cautious anxieties. In addition to drawing attention to the urbanization boom taking place in major colonial cities including Hải Phòng, Hà Nội, and Sài Gòn, what captured Phạm Quỳnh’s imagination was the extent to which the Chinese communities in these areas had been constantly growing and the increasing robustness of Chinese livelihood and the visibility of their commercial activities. Comparing Hải Phòng—an important port city to the north of Hà Nội with a long history of Chinese engagement in regional maritime trade—to Sài Gòn as the center of Indochinese economy, Phạm Quỳnh insisted on the seriousness of the Chinese presence, which he argued had been far more critical in Cochinchina

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<sup>5</sup> Kuan-Hsing Chen, *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

than Tonkin. He cited extensive statistics to substantiate this claim, averring that the Chinese demographic boom itself warranted a Chinese peril (*le péril chinois*) that should receive public attention. “In Hải Phòng, the Big Market of the North, there were 8,991 Chinese residents, but in the South, this increased to an overwhelming 75,000,” Phạm Quỳnh further elaborates, “which poses an enormous threat to Indochina and should therefore motivate our people to develop new methods to effectively compete in the globalized economy.”<sup>6</sup>

As Phạm Quỳnh elaborated on the developed transportation systems and economic potentials of southern Vietnam, he articulated what he saw as endemic problems now acting as imminent blockages to the colony’s full economic growth and the causes of structural inequality: Chinese rice monopoly and Cochinchina’s overreliance on the agricultural export economy. While observing how French infrastructural projects with their modernization impetus had managed to alter the ecology of rice-growing in the Six Provinces (Lục Tỉnh) and turned the area into a productive farming zone, Phạm Quỳnh also drew on the shortage of native initiatives and opportunities and Chinese monopolization of the rice-grinding and export industry under the French as auto-critiques of an unsustainable political economy. These problems, according to him, were manifest in two major domains. First was the non-existence of foundational (or start-up) capital for Indochinese farmers to establish their own farms and purchase equipment for rice-processing, which led to farmers’ dependence on Chinese middlemen to sell and distribute grain. And second, a related structural issue, the lack of provision of agricultural credit initiatives (*credit Agricole*) from the colonial state left Indochinese farmers with no choice but to turn to usurious credit market often operated in clandestine and wide-ranging networks by Chinese and Indian money-lenders (also known colloquially as *chetty*).<sup>7</sup> In Phạm Quỳnh’s travel accounts, Chinese

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<sup>6</sup> *Nam Phong* 1918, Phạm Quỳnh, “Một Tháng ở Nam Kỳ I,” 271.

<sup>7</sup> *Nam Phong* 20 Feb 1919, Phạm Quỳnh, “Một Tháng ở Nam Kỳ III,” 129-130.

economic presence emerged as a central economic problem that constituted a national imperative and a core struggle under the penetrating force of colonial capitalism.

Phạm Quỳnh was by no means a loner in his critique of the Chinese presence as a peril and his framing of their dominance as a political-economic exigency. Questions over the future of a rice-based and export-intensive colonial economy, and indigenous rights to commercial participation were not isolated concerns, but rather a collectively pressing intellectual momentum in the first half of twentieth-century Vietnam. Noted Vietnamese intellectual and statesman Trần Trọng Kim, following his visit to the city of Hải Ninh, launched an incisive economic critique, which focused readers' attention on the Chinese's commercial prowess and competitive advantages over Vietnamese native in business making and technology.<sup>8</sup> Deploying a culturally essentializing framework to get at the heart of the Chinese question, Trần Trọng Kim, while making the effort to communicate a warning to a wary Vietnamese public about the Chinese presence, also attempted to challenge the colonial protectorate of Chinese economic privileges at the expenses of Vietnamese developmental initiatives. Speaking on issues of Chinese immigration, legal residence, and assimilation, he concluded the travelogue on a provocative note:

I assume that, on principle of fairness, those Chinese who had acquired Indochinese citizenship and who were provided immense economic privileges and protected by the colonial state must speak Vietnamese, dress like an Annamese, and follow Annamese customs. Only until that becomes a reality, can we be safe from Chinese colonization.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Trần Trọng Kim, "Sự Du Lịch Đất Hải Ninh," [On Traveling to Hải Ninh] *Nam Phong*, May 1923, Thư Viện Người Việt Newspapers Archive. Cited in Christopher Goscha, "Récits de Voyage Vietnamiens et Prise de Conscience Indochinoise (c. 1920 - c. 1945)" in Claudine Salmon ed., *Récits de Voyages Asiatiques: Genres, Mentalités, Conception de l'espace : actes du colloque EFEO-EHESS de décembre 1994* (Paris : École Française d'Extrême-Orient, 1996).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 394. Translated by the author. The original text goes: "Tôi thiết tưởng cứ theo lẽ công bằng thì những người Tàu đã nhập tịch làm dân nước Nam là được cái quyền lợi làm ăn, lại được Nhà Nước bênh vực, thì trước hết phải nói tiếng An Nam, ăn mặc theo An Nam, và phải theo phong tục An Nam là phải. Có thế thì mới giữ được những người bên Tàu không sang xâm chiếm mất cái địa vị của người mình."

The *Chinese question* that appeared in Phạm Quỳnh's and Trần Trọng Kim's travel writings undoubtedly relied on ethnocentric colonial tropes to single out the perils of Chinese migration as the major causes for the downfall of indigenous economy. However, their anxieties, guided by the conviction that Chinese colonization was imminent and that the colonial state had the power to curb that influence, reflect a different mode of conceptualizing not only national identities—as French colonial subjects or autonomous Vietnamese in counteracting Chinese invasion—but also their ideas about conceiving progress within the purview of addressing the thorny ramifications of colonial capitalism. Moreover, with proper contextualization of the Indochinese political economy in the first half of the twentieth-century, one can notice the acuity with which their diagnoses of the Chinese problem were but a reaction to a few inherent economic problems of the French effort to transform native economic structures. These issues were located in three domains. First, the particularly emerging importance of Chinese middlemen—or theorized as colonial intermediaries to use Jane Burbank's and Frederick Cooper's terminology<sup>10</sup>—in business and commercial structures of French Indochina was conditioned by the French colonial government's disinterest in creating new initiatives to innovate native farming technology, train competent labor force, and transform the rice-growing monoculture in southern Vietnam. This situation was exacerbated by the colonial focus on rice-export and Chinese middlemen as intermediary agents enabling the Indochina's domestic economy to be linked to a global market while subjecting its political economy to the flux and flows of external forces. Historian Pierre Brocheux describes this dilemma in the Western Transbassac (Miền Tây) of the Mekong Delta as follows:

The administration was no more capable of amending the entrenched commercial structure than were the export companies. In this domain, as in so many others, the status quo was maintained. Thus, on the eve of the Great Depression in 1929, the rice culture of Mien Tay was dependent upon the exterior geographically, financially, and economically. The rice growers

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<sup>10</sup> See the introduction of Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2010).

worked only with foreign capital, and in most cases, they did not control prices, which were fixed either at Chợ Lớn or in foreign markets. Both transport and commerce were in foreign hands. Mien Tay had never been an integral part of a national, or even peninsular market. The French only exacerbated this long-standing situation since the colonial economy was tied to markets outside Vietnam.<sup>11</sup>

A second issue facing the Indochinese political economy with regards to Chinese migration, as both noted in Phạm Quỳnh's and Trần Trọng Kim's grievances, was a supportive agricultural credit scheme. This problem arose as the consequential derivatives of the colonial conquest that modified and destroyed existing patterns of farmers' procuring credits for land-tilling and harvesting, which during pre-colonial time rested heavily on the perpetuation of village-based kin and trust to maintain economic equilibrium.<sup>12</sup>

This last point above opens up another field of contention regarding the complex dependency of French upon Chinese capitals in Indochina to optimize profits and keep the colony financially operational. This feature of Chinese capitalism was not unique to colonial Vietnam. Kwee Hui Kian, using the ingenious game-synergy metaphor to describe the Dutch-Chinese alliance in the context of colonial Java's Northeast Coast in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, demonstrates the compromise and collaboration made by various power-holders including Dutch colonists and elite Chinese merchants to productively co-exist in the making of Java's political economy.<sup>13</sup> This complex, interdependent relationship was also illustrative of the colonial Vietnamese situation wherein the French were under pressure to co-opt, instead of coercing, Chinese merchants to mobilize resources and exploit their knowledge of trade routes and networks for the sustainability of an already-fractured "ambiguous" colony.<sup>14</sup> Early travelogues, while occupying themselves

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<sup>11</sup> Brocheux, *The Mekong Delta*. 70.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 72-73.

<sup>13</sup> Kwee, *The Political Economy of Java's Northeast Coast, c. 1740-1800*.

<sup>14</sup> Pierre Brocheux et al., *Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization ; 1858 - 1954*, From Indochina to Vietnam 2 (Berkeley, Calif.: Univ. of California Press, 2009).

with the *Chinese question*, heralded a critique of the political economy with simmering tension directed toward the Sino-Vietnamese-French triangular relations. This was why, as this dissertation has elucidated, Sinophobia quickly turned into an immediate political discourse in the event of a protracted rice crisis bracing colonial Vietnamese newspapers in 1919 when a plethora of economic issues was launched in writing as the first widespread attack on the Chinese communities and on the limits of French colonial rules. These debates and contestations formed the next illuminating moment for the Vietnamese educated elites' efforts to define the place of Chinese migration in the gradual unfolding of Vietnamese identities and notions of economic sovereignty in the face of colonial domination.

The 1919 anti-Chinese boycott, as one the first large-scale and organized anti-Chinese mass protest, while failing to yet produce any practical outcome, successfully captured public interest in the problem of Chinese migration in the vibrant Indochinese public sphere and drew enormous of attention of the French colonial government to the economic crises facing the colony. As economic historian Martin Murray points out, "the crisis of rice cultivation itself in the classic manner: continuous decline of prices, decrease in production and exports, and devaluation of the land." As the price of paddy continued to fall drastically along with the decline in paddy quotations, rice export hit a 2.5% drop from 1,051,397 tons in 1930 to 925, 686 tons in 1931.<sup>15</sup> The instability and slow crashes of the colonial rice economy posed a huge administrative and financial challenge to colonial governance, which ultimately elicited not only intense public reactions in the colony but also metropolitan demands for economic reorientation. More importantly, it had led to serious effort from the educated public to continue grappling with the persisting repercussions and legacies

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<sup>15</sup> Martin J. Murray, *The Development of Capitalism in Colonial Indochina (1870-1940)* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980). 458.

of colonial capitalism—a crucial perspective that has tended to eclipse public conversations on contemporary Vietnamese economy and society in its postcolonial present.

Historians of French colonial Vietnam tend to ascribe the primacy of the shifts in metropolitan France's economic policies toward Indochina around this time (1929-1934) to the perceptive attitudes of a few selected colonial officers who played a crucial role in these transformations. Andrew Hardy, for example, takes a biographical approach to examine the life and works of Paul Bernard (1892-1960), who first stepped foot in Indochina in 1923 and was then hired by the French and Colonial Finance Company (SFFC) as a banker. This important post launched his career, which reached an apotheosis in the 1930s, as not only a financier who acquired the necessary insider's knowledge of the colonial economy but also, in a latter development, as an influential adviser for the colony's dire economic situation.<sup>16</sup> As a prominent intellectual figure widely known for radically rethinking the fundamentals of French colonial economic policy, Bernard was keen on rejecting what he then viewed as the major contradiction of its approach characterized by, especially in time of global depression, a desire to uplift the colonial economy with intensifying investments and a “‘defensive reflex’, a retreat into the empire to maintain French monopoly of the colonial trade.”<sup>17</sup> He proposed a radical break from a monopolistic approach to economic development and the de-industrialization schemes (such as those advocated by Albert Sarraut with an aim to turning the colony in a powerful export machine). Instead, Paul Bernard made two critical interventions that were first unpopular but soon gained traction among the circle of French colonists: continued development of rice production and, more urgently, wholesale industrialization that could produce visible and on-the-ground improvement in indigenous

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<sup>16</sup> Andrew Hardy, “The Economics of French Rule in Indochina: A Biography of Paul Bernard (1892-1960),” *Modern Asian Studies* 32, no. 4 (1998): 807–48. 810.

<sup>17</sup> Hardy. 814.



standard of living. Especially for the latter, he insisted on the potentials of newly created industries to reduce unemployment—a critical issue he perceived to be endemic in Indochina—and reorient the entire political economy from an export-intensive one to an autonomous market with generative capacity for prices and supplies.

Interestingly, while Bernard’s economic programs, as Hardy systematically elaborates, made no mentions of the Chinese presence anywhere in his articulation and his conceptualization of industrialization was restrictively framed in a metropolitan/colony understanding of the colonial relations, there was a striking parallel, if not overlapping domains, between his reactive attitudes to the former order of French economic implementation and earlier Vietnamese intellectuals’ diagnosis of these issues. In other words, Paul Bernard’s provocative treatments of the colonial regime’s failures and proposals for radical changes were in fact hardly new. Vietnamese writers, thinkers, and intellectuals—many with direct or indirect affiliation with the French colonial government—had been ruminating for years on the structural consequences of colonial capitalism that Bernard had on his mind: agricultural land reform, unemployment, structure of the commercial market and indigenous participation, and industrialization.

In 1924, Đào Trinh Nhất, then working as a journalist for two colonial newspapers *Hữu Thanh* and *Thực Nghiệp Dân Báo*, published a full-length monograph entitled *The Dark Force of Chinese Migrants and the Question of Immigration to Southern Vietnam*.<sup>18</sup> This comprehensive volume was divided into two main sections. The first one, focusing on dire socioeconomic problems facing the Vietnamese, elaborately documented the structure of the Chinese communities, sociocultural institutions, commercial activities, habits, and interactions with Vietnamese native.

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<sup>18</sup> Đào Trinh Nhất, *Thế Lực Khách Trú và Vấn Đề Di Dân Vào Nam Kỳ* [The Dark Force of Chinese Migrants and the Question of Immigration to Southern Vietnam], (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Hội Nhà Văn, 2019). The original version was published in 1924.

And the second one turned to the primary analysis of the political economy with the Chinese threats looming large and, most intriguingly, the demand for state-sponsored migration as a strategy to compete with Chinese economic domination. Without a doubt, Đào Trinh Nhất's analysis of the colonial political economy was heavily grounded in the identification of Chinese migrants as a social and economic problem. His expositions of these problems and proposed resolutions reflect a complex self-negotiated conception of colonial modernity that involved a dual dialectic: conceiving modernization and progress on French colonial term and the "otherization" of Chinese migrants as a critique of this very modernity. As this dissertation also explicates many of these structural and systemic problems, it shows how Vietnamese antagonistic attitudes toward Chinese migrants thus could not simply be reduced to a simplistic teleology of nativist reactions rooted in a preordained history of dealing with Chinese aggressors. In so doing, we remain vulnerable to a Eurocentric and nationalist history that erased much more dynamic and local connections that pushed Vietnamese thinking on the modern political economy and configured the China-France-Vietnam triangular relations. An acknowledge of the complexity of ethnic co-existence and the interplay of historical actors and the trans-local networks they were embedded in, as I view it, remains crucial to the project of unsettling nationalist meta-narratives that motivates this research.

From the perspective of Sino-Vietnamese encounters in the colonial context, this dissertation echoes historian Christopher Goscha's call to go beyond the simplistic binary of French colonizers and Vietnamese colonized, and dig deeper into the complexity of inter-Asian interactions that is contingent on a *longue durée* history of migration and economic development in the Indochinese colonies.<sup>19</sup> But more importantly, I hope to have articulated the importance of Chinese migrant communities not only to the reconfigurations of the Vietnamese sociopolitical landscape in the

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<sup>19</sup> Christopher E. Goscha, "Widening the Colonial Encounter: Asian Connections Inside French Indochina During the Interwar Period," *Modern Asian Studies* 43, no. 5 (September 2009), 1224.

shifting repertoire of colonial power but also to Vietnamese self-negotiated understandings of modernity and national identities. Vietnamese intellectual reactions to the Chinese economic presence served as an illuminating example for this type of interactions. It revealed how, through trenchant critiques of the Chinese problems in the framework of French republicanism, they questioned the problematic reality of colonial capitalism while seeking to navigate the ambiguity of being colonial subjects with the desire to participate on an equal basis with their French and Chinese counterparts in a fairer economic system.

In this work, I have sought to also demonstrate how the dynamic of inter-Asian connections was complicated by the ebbs and flows of an increasingly globalized economy and the irresolvable contradictions of the colonial project. Vietnamese entrance into this global capitalist network was marked by the inherently contradictory enterprises of French colonialism—between collaborationism, Chinese cooptation, and anti-colonial nationalism—and a co-existing transnational Chinese community. “Taming the intractable” as a colonial imperative, as I analyzed throughout the dissertation, aimed to resolve these contradictions, from the reconfiguration of an incoherent fiscal programs to imposing exorbitant capitation taxes, from setting up state monopolies to eliminate Chinese commercial control to the invention of new policing measures. Yet, while colonial modernization projects had begun to generate local problems for the indigenous population, French inconsistent economic planning resting on the foundation of an extractive economy and hyper-modernization—discussed and criticized by abovementioned key intellectuals—only further enflamed existing Sino-Vietnamese tension.

Into the First and Second Indochina Wars, Sino-Vietnamese relations in Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn continued to deteriorate. The failure of colonial republicanism and its central framework of Franco-Vietnamese collaboration also had the effect of weakening Chinese political privileges

while leaving the French colonial state vulnerable to gradual collapse, which it eventually did by the time of the August Revolution in 1945. Evolving revolutionary situations in China and the ROC's shifting views of the overseas Chinese (*Huaqiao*), too, provided Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn's Chinese with an official outlet to channel their mobilizational energy and voice their politics—a perk that never existed in Cochinchina. The anti-colonial struggle that marked the height of Vietnamese nationalism also impacted the Chinese community as part of the affected urban population. Anthropologist William G. Skinner carefully documented their plights in a 1950 report, indicating the struggle of imposed double-taxation by the French and the Vietminh force as well as the rampant threats of violent intimidation by the military.<sup>20</sup> When the colonial state finally disintegrated in the event of the 1954 Geneva Agreement that forced the French to give up their control of Indochina, the Chinese fell into an immediate political crisis, which Massimo Galluppi describes as a “tragic destiny”:

Condemned to live away from their homeland and devoid of protection because of the century-old crises of Chinese power, they could only live and prosper under the aegis of a regime which granted them no political rights and against which they incessantly fought to defend their national dignity. As paradoxical as this may seem, since the results were meager and transient, the time when their battle was being fought at the beginning of the century was a happy season from a political point of view, holding the promise of a better future which never come.<sup>21</sup>

While the postcolonial future of Chinese migrants goes beyond the scope of this dissertation, this particular dimension of colonial politics, this dissertation hopes, will be meaningfully considered in contemporary conversations on Vietnamese Sinophobia and anti-Chinese aggression, beyond the political *impasse* of discourses centered on xenophobia, anti-colonial nationalism, or the ingrained teleology of resistance to foreign invasion.

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<sup>20</sup> William G. Skinner, *Report on the Chinese in Southeast Asia*, [Ithaca, NY.] Southeast Asia Program, Department of Far Eastern Studies, Cornell University, 1951, p. 22.

<sup>21</sup> Massimo Galluppi, *The Chinese in French Cochinchina and the 1906 Commission: A Study on Collaboration* (S.I.: Istituto Universitario Orientale, 1986), p. 276.

Finally, scholarly debates over power, pluralism, and colonial modernity, by proxy, invite important questions about the long-lasting implications of overseas Chinese political involvements for our understanding of Vietnamese history in the subsequent periods. Although this dissertation primarily explores the French colonial period, my intent is also to historicize the presence of Chinese communities in contemporary Vietnam and to reexamine Sino-Vietnamese relations in the long twentieth century. In so doing, this project engages in a broader goal that illuminates the value of examining the history of Chinese networks, interactions, and institutions under French rule: tracing the roots of inter-ethnic conflicts and postwar anti-Chinese antagonism not simply in a given, teleological China-Vietnam relationship characterized mainly by domination and aggression, but in the intricate entanglement of Chinese diasporic relations, the structural inequality of colonial capitalism, and the rise of revolutionary nationalism in colonial Indochina. This way, my dissertation seeks to open up a new theoretical venue to rethink not only the historical roles that Chinese migrants played in the formation of colonial modernity and Vietnamese nation-building, but also their silenced yet contested places in Vietnam and Southeast Asia today.

## APPENDIX

**Table A-1: Rice Exports of Mainland Southeast Asia (1860-1914)**

**Source: Norman G. Owen, "The Rice Industry in Mainland Southeast Asia," *The Journal of Siam Society*, Vol. 59, part II, July 1971, pp. 93-94.**

Note: Export volumes are measured in thousand metric tons

<b>Year</b>	<b>Burma (All Ports)</b>	<b>Rangoon</b>	<b>Siam Bangkok</b>	<b>Cochinchina Sài Gòn/Chợ Lớn</b>	<b>Mainland Total</b>
<b>1860</b>			106	64	
<b>1861</b>			143	83	
<b>1862</b>			104	44	
<b>1863</b>	318	122	114	12	444
<b>1864</b>	423	190	160	69	122
<b>1865</b>	527	290	3	56	586
<b>1866</b>	479	226	99	151	729
<b>1867</b>	278	233	122	217	617
<b>1868</b>	354	183	139	146	639
<b>1869</b>	500	274	180	179	859
<b>1870</b>	370	204	172	253	795
<b>1871</b>	493	247	124	330	947
<b>1872</b>	546	297	135	259	940
<b>1873</b>	806	465	58	308	1172
<b>1874</b>	910	540	133	206	1249
<b>1875</b>	751	437	261	375	1387
<b>1876</b>	809	437	281	379	1469
<b>1877</b>	795	451	207	340	1342
<b>1878</b>	650	396	158	241	1049
<b>1879</b>	725	446	269	402	1396
<b>1880</b>	816	445	230	315	1361
<b>1881</b>	941	506	249	276	1466
<b>1882</b>	1050	620	223	406	1679
<b>1883</b>	1194	759	176	577	1947
<b>1884</b>	951	561	316	573	1840
<b>1885</b>	759	486	247	501	1507
<b>1886</b>	1078	644	242	528	1848
<b>1887</b>	1028	626	442	535	2005
<b>1888</b>	1007	609	504	566	2077
<b>1889</b>	796	553	339	318	1453
<b>1890</b>	1027	692	539	582	2037

**Table A-1 (Cont'd)**

<b>1891</b>	<b>1381</b>	<b>940</b>	<b>253</b>	<b>443</b>	<b>2077</b>
<b>1892</b>	1279	809	238	615	2132
<b>1893</b>	1039	749	887	687	2613
<b>1894</b>	886	651	588	605	2079
<b>1895</b>	1282	856	548	624	2454
<b>1896</b>	1382	940	536	553	2471
<b>1897</b>	1085	738	667	587	2339
<b>1898</b>	1118	707	618	678	2314
<b>1899</b>	1451	1014	510	767	2730
<b>1900</b>	1215	821	465	688	2368
<b>1901</b>	1201	796	767	710	2674
<b>1902</b>	1360	1008	895	900	3155
<b>1903</b>			656	528	
<b>1904</b>			947	785	
<b>1905</b>				451	
<b>1906</b>			967	629	
<b>1907</b>			963	1176	
<b>1908</b>			891	883	
<b>1909</b>			1028	800	
<b>1910</b>			1067	996	
<b>1911</b>			1173		
<b>1912</b>			703		
<b>1913</b>			659	1415	
<b>1914</b>			1315	1561	



**Table A-2: Cochinchina Rice Export Duties (1879-1911)**  
**Source: Norman G. Owen, "The Rice Industry in**  
**Mainland Southeast Asia," *The Journal of Siam Society*,**  
**Vol. 59, part II, July 1971, p. 121**  
**Reproduced from original statistics in Albert Coquerel,**  
***Paddy et Riz de Cochinchine*, Lyon: A. Rey, 1911, pp. 187-200**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Duties</b>		<b>Exchange Francs/Piastre</b>	<b>Franc Rice</b>	<b>Duties Paddy</b>	<b>Price* Piastres/100kg</b>	<b>Duty Ad valorem</b>
<b>1879</b>	0.165	0.165	4.605	0.76	0.76	2.56	6.50%
<b>1881</b>	0.25	0.185	4.655	1.16	0.86	2.06	12.10%
<b>1882</b>	0.25	0.25	4.67	1.17	1.17	2.14	11.70%
<b>1887</b>	0.31	0.31	3.95	1.22	1.22	2.48	12.50%
<b>1888</b>	0.25	0.25	3.82	0.96	0.96	2.06	12.10%
<b>1893</b>	0.26	0.26	3.25	0.85	0.85	2.72	9.50%
<b>1895</b>	0.31	0.31	2.67	0.83	0.83	3.11	10%
<b>1896</b>	0.31	0.4	2.73	0.85	1.09	3.62	8.60%
<b>1899-1911</b>	0.342	0.438	2.45	0.84	1.07	4.5	7.60%

**Table A-3 : Population of Immigrant Chinese in Southern Vietnam (1889)**  
**Source: Wang Wen-Yuan. *Les Relations Entre l'Indochine Française et La Chine*, Étude de Géographie Économique, Par Wang Wen-Yuan, Thèse... Pour Le Doctorat de l'Université..., 1937, p. 16.**

<b>Provinces</b>	<b>Chinese</b>
<b>Sóc Trăng</b>	4921
<b>Trà Vinh</b>	4232
<b>Gia Định</b>	2809
<b>Cần Thơ</b>	2723
<b>Bạc Liêu</b>	2563
<b>Mỹ Tho</b>	2453
<b>Sa Đéc</b>	1972
<b>Châu Đốc</b>	1529
<b>Vĩnh Long</b>	1391
<b>Bến Tre</b>	1363
<b>The Twentieth District</b>	1062
<b>Long Xuyên</b>	990
<b>Biên Hòa</b>	951
<b>Rạch Giá</b>	900
<b>Hà Tiên</b>	870
<b>Thủ Dầu Một</b>	704
<b>Tân An</b>	549
<b>Tây Ninh</b>	709
<b>Gò Công</b>	465
<b>Bà Rịa</b>	312
<b>Poulo-Condore (Côn Đảo)</b>	127
<b>Chợ Lớn</b>	14944
<b>Chợ Lớn (under inspection)</b>	994
<b>Sài Gòn</b>	7195
<b>Total</b>	56528

**Table A-4 : Arrival Entries of Immigrant Chinese in Indochina (1923-1933)**  
**Source: Wang Wen-Yuan. *Les Relations Entre l'Indochine Française et La Chine*, Étude de Géographie Économique, Par Wang Wen-Yuan, Thèse... Pour Le Doctorat de L'Université..., 1937, p. 7.**

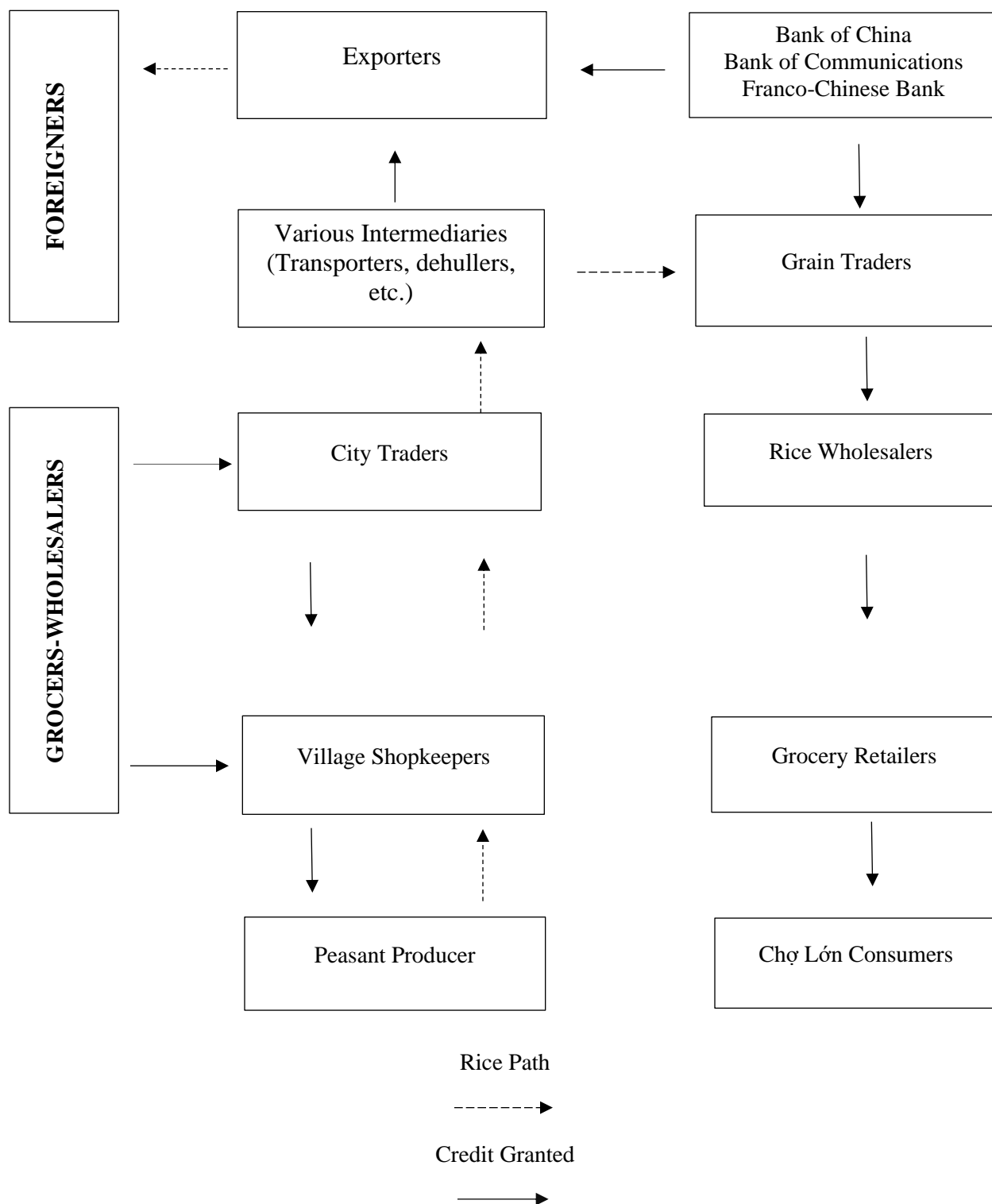
<b>Dates</b>	<b>Males</b>	<b>Females</b>	<b>Infants</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>1923</b>	20472	13028	13517	47017
<b>1924</b>	21491	10749	11988	44228
<b>1925</b>	19180	8868	11668	39716
<b>1926</b>	26050	12508	14021	52579
<b>1927</b>	18518	15813	13871	48202
<b>1928</b>	41966	16990	15288	74244
<b>1929</b>	48302	16177	16241	80720
<b>1930</b>	36900	15953	18047	70900
<b>1931</b>	32108	14485	11191	57784
<b>1932</b>	16521	10403	8350	35274
<b>1933</b>	17114	9571	9501	36186
	308562	144545	143683	596790

**Table A-5: Population of Chinese Dialect Groups in Vietnam and Cambodia (1950)**  
**Source: Tsai Maw Kuey, *Les Chinois Au Sud Vietnam*, (Paris : Bibliothèque Nationale, 1968), p. 86.**

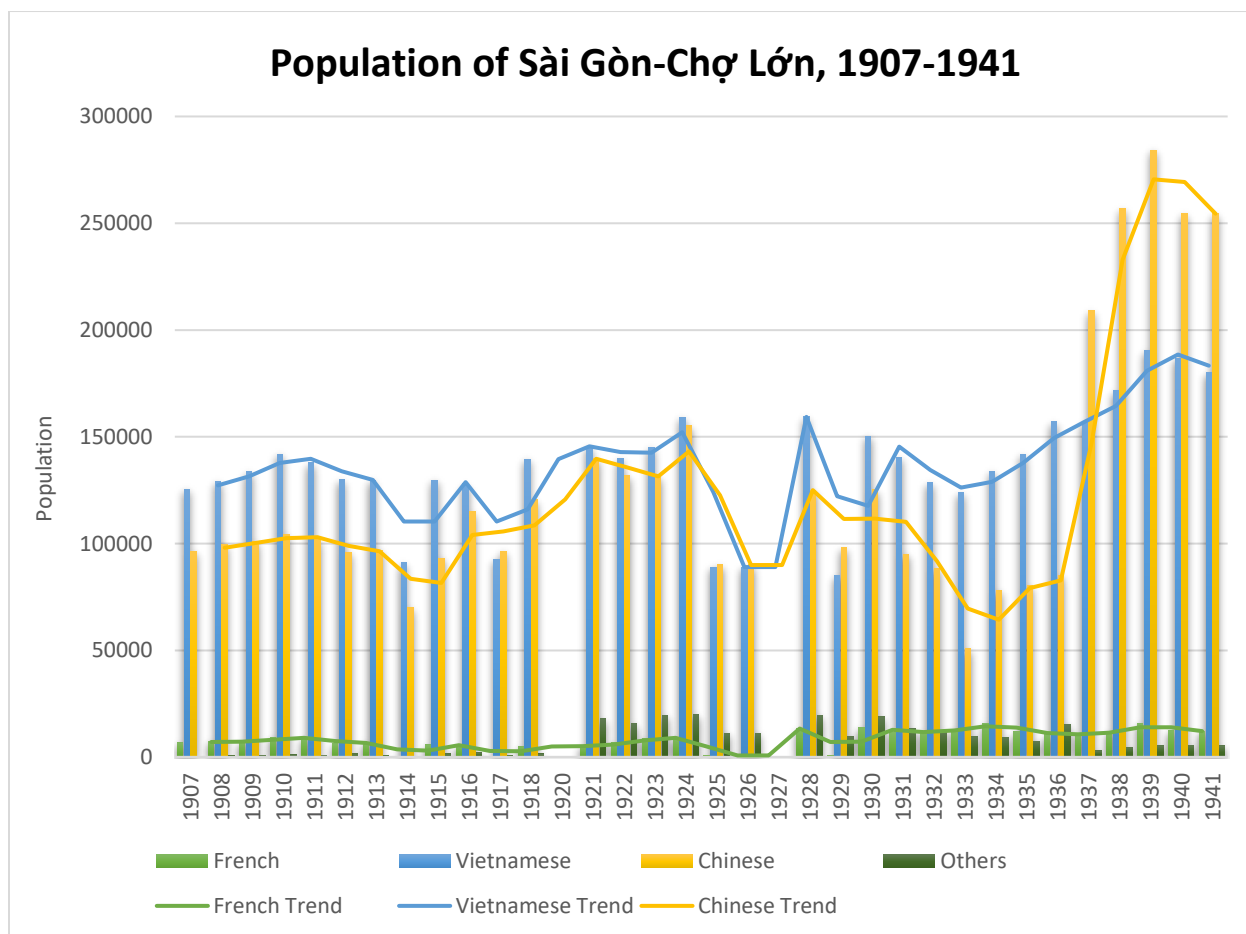
Groups	Vietnam		Cambodia	
		%		%
<b>Cantonese (Guangdong)</b>	337,500	45	50,000	10
<b>Teochew</b>	225,000	30	150,000	60
<b>Hakka</b>	75,000	10	10,000	4
<b>Fujian</b>	60,000	8	15,500	7
<b>Hainan</b>	30,000	4	10,000	4

**Table A-6 : Capacities of Chinese Hospitals in Chợ Lớn**  
**Source: Tsai Maw Kuey, *Les Chinois Au Sud Vietnam*, (Paris : Bibliothèque Nationale, 1968), p. 106.**

<b>Title of Establishments</b>	<b>Capacity</b>	<b>Annexed Delivery Clinics</b>
	<b>Beds</b>	<b>Beds</b>
<b>Cantonese Hospital</b>	366	52
<b>Teochew Hospital</b>	220	30
<b>Fujian Hospital</b>	120	12
<b>Hakka Hospital</b>	60	--
<b>Hainan Hospital</b>	60	--
<b>Chung-Cheng Hospital</b>	200	--



**Figure A-14: Rice Commerce's Credit Chains in Chợ Lớn**  
 Source: Tsai Maw Kuey, *Les Chinois Au Sud Vietnam*, (Paris : Bibliothèque Nationale, 1968), p. 161.



**Figure A-15: Demographic trends in Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn (1907-1941)**

**Graph Compiled by the Author, using MS Excel**

**Source: Vietnam National Archive, Center II, Ho Chi Minh City**

**André Baudrit, *Guide Historique Des Rues de Sài Gòn*, Sài Gòn : Société des Imprimeries et Librairies Indochinoises, 1943.**

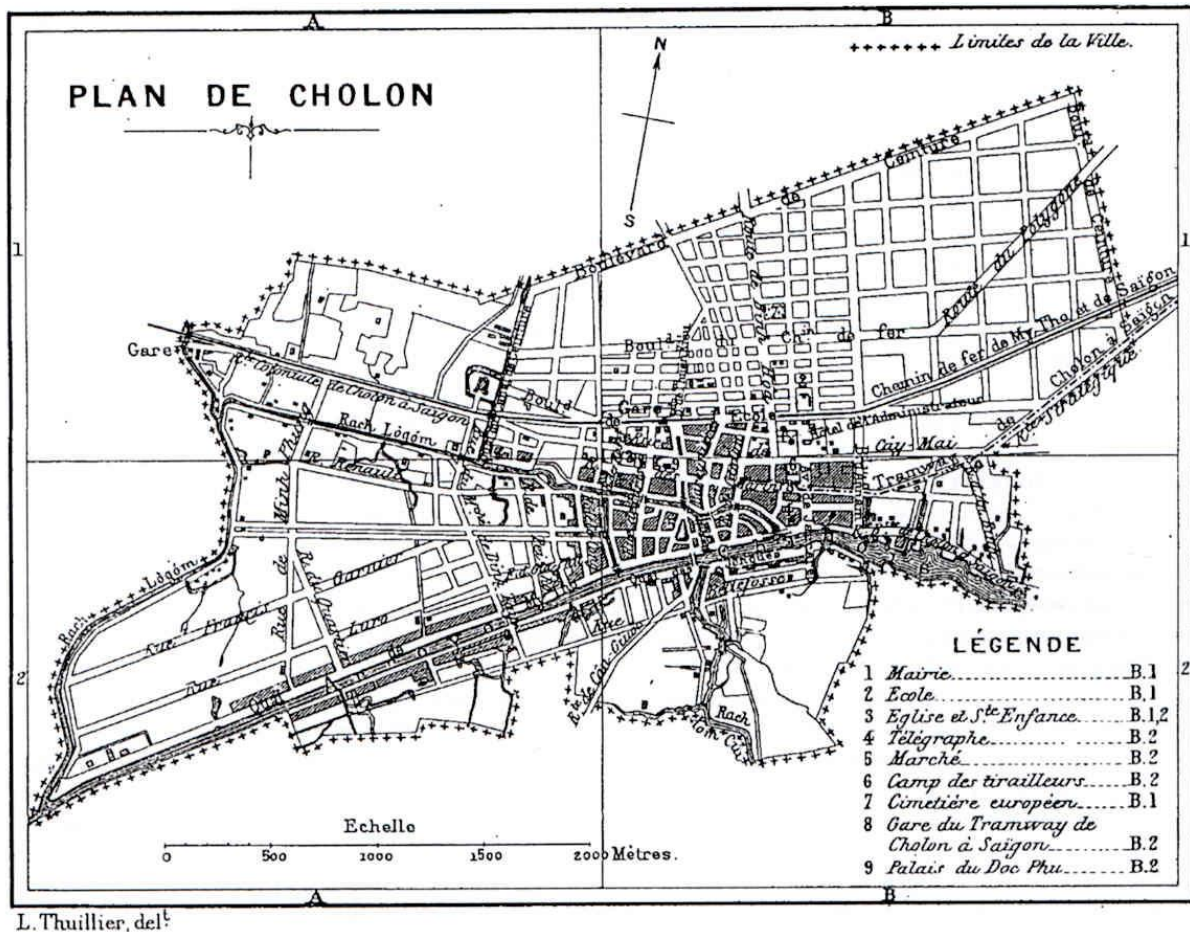
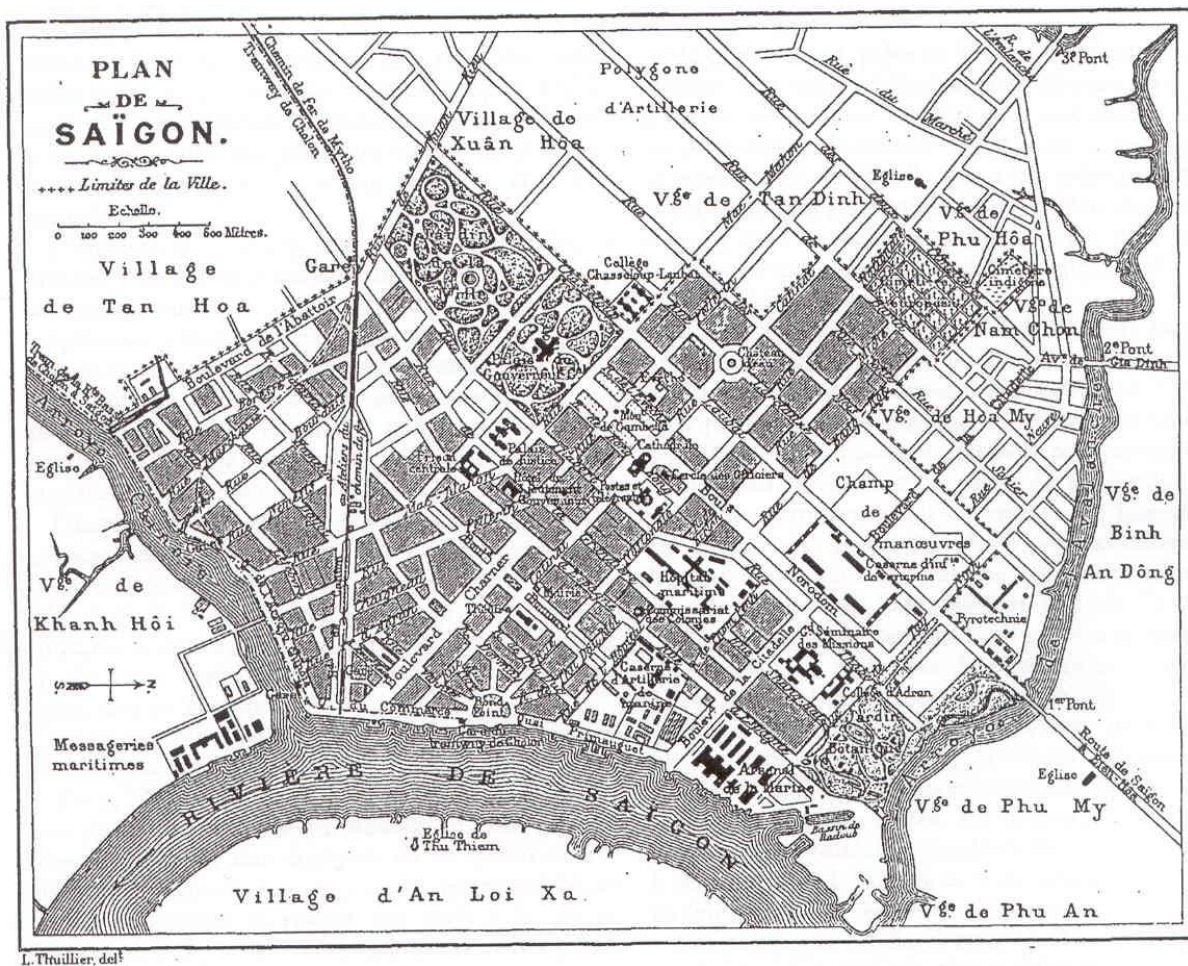


Figure A-16 : Plan de Chợ Lớn (1893)

Source : *Revue Tour Du Monde*, 1893

<http://belleindochine.free.fr/images/Plan/TourDuMondeCarteChợ Lớn.jpg>

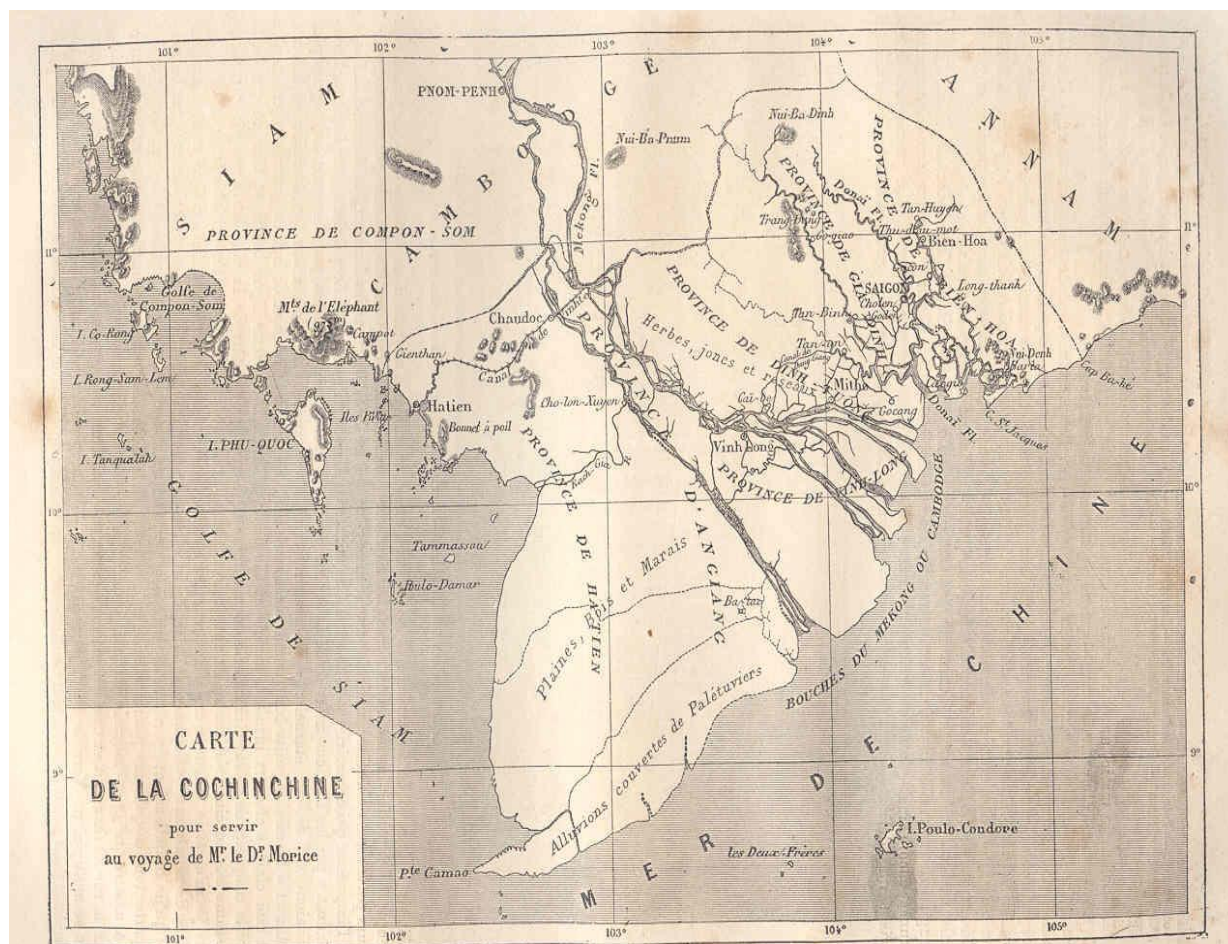




**Figure A-17 : Plan de Sài Gòn (1893)**

**Source : *Revue Tour Du Monde*, 1893**

<http://belleindochine.free.fr/images/Plan/TourDuMondeCarteSài Gòn.jpg>



**Figure A-18 : A Cartography of Cochinchina (1875)**

**Source : *Revue Tour Du Monde*, 1893**

<http://belleindochine.free.fr/images/Plan/TourDuMondeCarteCochinchine.jpg>





Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

**Figure A-19 : Chinese Merchants and Their Spouses**

**Source: 190 cartes postales de Cochinchine**

**Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Société de Géographie, SG WD-163**

**<https://catalogue.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb405896255>**

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National Library of Singapore

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*Nam Kỳ Kinh Tế Báo*

*Nam Phong*

*Nông Cổ Mìn Đàm*

*Phong Hóa*

*Phụ Nữ Tân Văn*

*Sài Gòn*

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