

TRANSNATIONAL WEBS: OVERSEAS CHINESE ECONOMIC AND
POLITICAL NETWORKS IN COLONIAL VIETNAM, 1870 - 1945

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TRANSNATIONAL WEBS: OVERSEAS CHINESE ECONOMIC AND
POLITICAL NETWORKS IN COLONIAL VIETNAM, 1870 - 1945

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This dissertation is a study in ethnicity and transnational networks with the primary focus on the Chinese in Indochina, including Cochinchina, Cambodia, and Tonkin, which were under French colonial rule. It is the product of research undertaken at Hanoi's Vietnamese National Archives #1, the Vietnamese National Library in Hanoi, Saigon's Vietnamese National Archives #2, the Centre des Archives d'Outre-Mer in Aix-en-Provence, London's Public Record Office, and the Australian National Library and National Archives in Canberra. Access to these archives has allowed me to place overseas Chinese networks within the contexts of both Chinese and Southeast Asian history. As a result, this work has theoretical implications for transnational studies of borders inside and outside of Asia.

This dissertation is the first transregional study of institutions organized by the overseas Chinese population of Indochina during the French period. These Chinese formed their original organizations in China, and then reached across the China-Indochina border, expanding across Indochina. In China, native-place ties inherited from their fathers bound them together, and after they reached Indochina, they established bases, most often in Saigon-Cholon, and then expanded into other cities and towns where their networks competed for commercial gain and political influence. Narratives of the lives, crimes, and political and economic ventures of scores of overseas Chinese living and working in Cochinchina, Tonkin, and Cambodia provide the backbone for my arguments. At the time, all of these places were under French colonial rule, and Chinese networks negotiated the pathways and pitfalls of French

colonial law to achieve their own agendas and maintain multidirectional ties, not only with all of their branches in Indochina but with their native places in China as well. By concentrating on the points where Chinese, Vietnamese, and French interests intersected, I show how they cooperated and came into conflict with each other. Ultimately, I conclude that even while the French held official authority in the colonies of Indochina, Chinese transnational networks exercised unofficial control over decision-making, not only in commerce but also in the wider arenas of politics, law, and society as they pertained to local Chinese communities.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Tracy Barrett was born in Waco, Texas, in 1972. As the daughter of a Foreign Service family, she spent her childhood in Germany, Tunisia, North Yemen, and Jordan before finally settling near Washington, DC. From 1990 to 1994, she attended the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia, from which she graduated with majors in History and East Asian Studies. During that time, she also spent 8 months as a student at Beijing Normal University in the People's Republic of China.

From 1994 to 1996, Tracy Barrett continued her study of China at the Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio, where she earned one Master's degree in Chinese Literature and Linguistics and another in Chinese History. After completing her Master's degrees, she moved to Gunma Prefecture in Japan, where she taught English in the cities of Maebashi and Takasaki for a year and a half.

In 1998, she became a graduate student at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. She earned a Master's degree in History in 2001 and then spent three years pursuing dissertation research abroad, including work in France, Viet Nam, and Australia.

Tracy Barrett is married and has two sons.

To my husband, Michael Learn, whose love and dedication have touched every single
page of this dissertation

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In 2003-2004, I profited greatly from my appointment as a Luce Fellow in the Pacific and Asian History division of Australia National University's Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies. Marion Weeks and Dorothy McIntosh patiently introduced me to the ways of the Coombs Building and helped to facilitate our transition to antipodean life. Philip Taylor, David Marr, and Ben Kerkvliet offered valuable critiques of and assistance with my early writings as well. But I cannot mention ANU without expressing my deep and heartfelt gratitude to Li Tana and Nola Cooke, whose enthusiastic support, constant encouragement, and careful criticisms have added depth and sophistication, as well as enjoyment, to my work. I must also thank the staff of the Sir James Matheson Library Rare Books Collection at

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teachers, and colleagues that have crossed my path over the last 20 years, its errors and shortcomings are entirely my own.

TCB
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A NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

One issue that severely impacted the ability of French authorities to exercise control over Indochina's Chinese community also challenges the modern day researcher attempting to investigate those same communities and make concrete connections between its members: the problem of Chinese names. Every Chinese name had a Vietnamese pronunciation due to the fact that the Vietnamese shared parts of China's linguistic heritage. Originally, Chinese characters comprised the language of Vietnam's educated elite, the mandarin. These characters were known as *Han*. Over time, a Vietnamization of these characters occurred, resulting a written language composed of Chinese style characters with very different meanings, pronunciations, or even composition from any purely Chinese counterparts. This language was called *nom*. By the early 20th century in Vietnam, most texts were written in a combination of *Han* and *nom* characters, but by the time of the French, efforts at linguistic modernization intended to increase literacy rates across Indochina resulted in the promotion of *quốc ngữ*, the romanized version of Vietnamese characters still used today.

Because all Chinese characters had a Vietnamese pronunciation, all Chinese names also had Vietnamese pronunciations, and by the 20th century, many, if not most, overseas Chinese went by the *quốc ngữ* pronunciations of their names while they were in Indochina. The problem rests in the fact that one Vietnamese transliteration of a specific Chinese character might actually be a homonym of dozens, or even scores, of other Chinese characters. For this reason, and because the generally colonial nature of my archival documents favors the use of *quốc ngữ*, I have generally not provided names in Chinese characters. In fact, many Chinese businessmen and notables in Indochina even used *quốc ngữ* when signing their names on petitions sent to the French that were written *entirely in Chinese!*

INTRODUCTION

The Chinese of Southeast Asia are a population of great historic and economic significance in the region. Chinese across Southeast Asia organized themselves into communities based upon dialect and native place. These organizations, called *huiguan*, closely paralleled the functions and demography of similar associations located in China's major urban centers, and they attempted to replicate, with varying degrees of fidelity, the social, religious, and networking environments of the native places from which they hailed. Furthermore, by providing material aid and financial connections that extended from China into major urban centers across the region, and from Southeast Asia's urban capitals into the rural hinterlands beyond, overseas Chinese communities did exist within a framework of carefully defined and measured relationships that was essential to the functioning of Chinese trade and commerce in the region.

Chinese communities in Indochina differed even more significantly from the Chinese model than many of their counterparts in other Southeast Asian countries. With first seven and later five linguistically based groups, Indochina's Chinese communities exhibited a far smaller degree of intercommunity segmentation than did the Chinese populations in Singapore, for example, where Chinese groups by the hundreds allowed intra-community division to a remarkable degree. This homogenization was in large part due to the combined effects of regulating legislation imposed upon them from the outside, first by the Nguyen regime and later by the French colonialists. The wealth of recent scholarship focusing upon urban organizations in modern China gives us unprecedented access into the structure, function, and evolution of Chinese societies, organizations, and associations in the great cities of the Chinese Empire and, later, Republic. With this dissertation, I hope to have created a synthetic study emphasizing the importance of Chinese

congregations, or *huiguan*, in Indochina, their ties to one another and to the native places from whence they came, and the ways in which the French colonial authority both nurtured and undermined these ties.

How did different elements of overseas Chinese society interact with one another? Established overseas Chinese communities and enclaves long predated the French occupation of Indochina, meaning that well before the arrival of the French, competition and conflict between subethnic groups had already generated ferocious rivalries and devoted partnerships. This phenomenon was most marked in the case of Cochinchina's secret societies, where, for example, rivalry between the Trieu Chau and Phuoc Kien Chinese in the Mekong Delta was so intense that French police and local authorities spent months trying to stem the wave of violence that the open conflict between the two dialect groups had spawned. The ensuing period of adjustment, where Chinese communities and French colonialists tested the boundaries of a relationship altered by an ever-expanding colonialism, represented a time of great significance for both populations, but especially for the overseas Chinese, whose growing awareness of national interests spawned a new kind of self-identification. By the late imperial and early republican periods, Chinese nationalism and anti-foreign sentiment reached such a crescendo that nationalist activities in Saigon and Cholon were often either sponsored by the united congregations of the cities, or led by the Guomindang Committee for Indochina, a group that boasted a leadership comprised of notable Chinese from across the congregational spectrum. Accordingly, this story is set in a time when all of these places were under French colonial rule, and Chinese networks negotiated the pathways and pitfalls of French colonial law to achieve their own agendas and maintain multidirectional ties, not only with all of their branches in Indochina but with their native places in China as well.

This study is the product of research undertaken at Hanoi's Vietnamese National Archives #1, the Vietnamese National Library in Hanoi, Hanoi's Social Science Library, Ho Chi Minh City's Vietnamese National Archives #2, Ho Chi Minh City's Tông Hop Library, the Centre des Archives d'Outre-Mer in Aix-en-Provence, London's Public Record Office, and the Australian National Library and National Archives in Canberra. Access to Chinese-, Vietnamese-, and French-language documents in these various archives has allowed me to place overseas Chinese networks within the contexts of both Chinese and Southeast Asian history, a circumstance that I hope will contribute significantly, not only to our understanding of Chinese organizations in general and Chinese communities in Indochina under French rule, but also to our awareness and appreciation of the importance of competing colonialisms, transnational ties, and border studies outside of, as well as within, Asia. The place filled by this dissertation in the historiography of China and the overseas Chinese is a more complex question. To understand the position of this research in the larger field of Asian history, we must first turn to the topic of Jurgen Habermas' public sphere.

Public Sphere and Civil Society

In the post-World War II era, scholars of state and society have repeatedly confronted the issue of public sphere as German social theorist Jurgen Habermas has conceived it. As Habermas writes, public sphere is "a domain of our social life in which such a thing as public opinion can be formed. Access to the public sphere is open in principle to all citizens ... Citizens act as a public when they deal with matters of general interest without being subject to coercion; thus with the guarantee that they may assemble and unite freely, and express and publicize their opinions freely ... The term 'public opinion' refers to the functions of criticism and control of organized state

authority that the public exerts.”¹ In other words, Habermas’s “public sphere” deals fundamentally with our modern notions of democracy and participatory government.

For Habermas, public sphere is not the inevitable result of history’s natural evolution; rather, it is the by-product not only of a specific time and place, Western Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries, but also of a specific class of citizens, the bourgeoisie. Habermas writes, “under conditions of complete mobility of producers, products, and capital, supply and demand would always be in equilibrium ... under these conditions, but only under these, would each person have an equal chance ... to attain the status of property owner and thus of ‘man,’ that is, the qualifications of a private person admitted to the public sphere – property and education.”² In this context, issues of public sphere seem singularly unsuited to Chinese history, whether Imperial or Republican. And yet, as William Rowe has summarized in his comprehensive historiographical article on the subject, public sphere is the very topic to which historians of Chinese State-Society relations have turned. From Chang Hao’s study of Liang Qichao’s attempts at mass politicization to Rowe’s own books on Hankou, scholars such as Mary Backus Rankin, David Strand, Keith Schoppa, Joseph Fewsmith, Philip Kuhn, Prasenjit Duara, and Kwan Mun Bun have all made the issue of the public sphere, or of its Chinese vocabulary, a centerpiece in the historiography of modern China.³ In fact, as will be elaborated upon later in this introduction, the

¹ Jurgen Habermas, “The Public Sphere,” in *Rethinking Popular Culture: Contemporary Perspectives in Cultural Studies* ed. Chandra Mukerji and Michael Schudson, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991), 398-9.

² Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* tr. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1989), 86-7.

³ See Chang Hao, *Liang Ch’i-ch’ao and Intellectual Transition in China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971); Prasenjit Duara, *Culture, Power, and the state: North china Villages, 1900-1942* (Stanford, CA: Stanford university Press, 1988); Joseph Fewsmith, “From Guild to Interest Group: The Transformation of Public and Private in Late Qing China,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 25, no. 4 (Oct 1983); Philip Kuhn and Susan Mann Jones, “Introduction,” in *Select Papers from the Center for Far Eastern Studies* 3 (University of Chicago) (1978-9); Kwan Man Bun, *The Salt*

issue of the public sphere in China is quite contentious, as evidenced by Frederic Wakeman's blistering rejection of its applicability to the Chinese case.⁴

In the Introduction to his edited volume, *A History of Private Life*,⁵ Philippe Ariès has suggested that, in Europe, the public sphere grew most rapidly when the state's bureaucracy proved least able to back up its claims of control, or, in the words of William Rowe, this growth "took place in precisely that early modern interval when the state's *jurisdictional claims* were expanding at a far greater pace than its *institutional abilities* to realize these claims."⁶ While Rowe goes on to say that recent scholarship on China makes Ariès' model more applicable to late Imperial and Republican China, I would like to suggest that this model also raises interesting questions when applied to the world of Indochina's overseas Chinese. But before this dissertation goes any further in addressing this issue of public sphere, some clarification is in order. "Public Sphere" as it described by Habermas is a clearly defined intellectual category, implying the rise of common space, public gatherings, and the freedom of speech provided therein; however, the strict geographical, temporal, and demographic bounds placed upon the public sphere by Habermas make its direct applicability to any Chinese case a bit far-reaching. More useful, perhaps,

Merchants of Tianjin: State Making and Civil Society in Late Imperial China (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001); Mary Backus Rankin, *Elite Activism and Political Transformation in China: Zhejiang Province, 1865-1911* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1986); William Rowe, *Hankow: Commerce and Society in a Chinese City, 1796-1889* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1984) and *Hankow: Conflict and Community in a Chinese City* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1989); Keith R. Schoppa, *Chinese Elites and Political Change: Zhejiang Province in the Early 20th Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982); and David Strand, *Rickshaw Beijing: City, People, and Politics in 1920's China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

⁴ For a fierce post-Tiananmen rebuttal to the existence of a Chinese public sphere, see Frederic Wakeman, "The Civil Society and Public Sphere Debate: Western Reflections on Chinese Political Culture" *Modern China* 19, no. 2 (April 1993).

⁵ Philippe Ariès, "Introduction," in *A History of Private Life: Volume III, Passions of the Renaissance* ed. Roger Chartier and tr. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 9-11.

⁶ William Rowe, "The Public Sphere in Modern China," *Modern China* 16, no 3 (July 1990), 323.

would be an examination of public sphere from a structural perspective, the very scenario that Ariès has described. To that end, this dissertation removes the definition of public sphere from its original context, altering the meaning in order to describe the space between the overt autocratic dominance claimed by Indochina's French colonial authorities, whether practically or through colonial legislation, and the extent of this authority's impact upon Indochina's overseas Chinese.

Local Elite Autonomy and the Public Sphere in China

In order to better situate these questions in a Chinese context, a more careful examination of the public sphere debate as it pertains specifically to China is required. In fact, the roots of this debate can be found much earlier, in the works of German sociologist Max Weber.⁷ Weber, in an exhaustive examination of the secondary sources available on China at the time, determined that China's material inferiority to the West in modern times stemmed directly from her failure to develop a "rational" organization or system of behavior, an inadequacy he attributed to China's lack of an "urban community." According to Weber, an urban community was characterized by, among other things, equality under a rational legal system, general enfranchisement and bureaucratic accountability, and a heavy emphasis on trade and commerce, which formed the basis of a sort of proto-capitalism.

China's failings were, according to Weber, made worse by the presence of a powerful, autocratic government whose control of commercial operations and natural passages of trade (for example, rivers) determined the development of the economic sector rather than the increasing autonomy of any urban commercial community. More damningly, Weber asserted that the Chinese emphasis on native-place and

⁷ In particular, Max Weber, *The City*, tr. & ed. Don Martindale and Gurtrud Neuwirth (New York: Collier Books, 1958) and Max Weber, *The Religions of China: Confucianism and Taoism*, tr. Hans Gerth (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1951).

kinship effectively precluded the development of any urban community or urban autonomy. Weber noted, “The ‘city’ was ... never the ‘hometown’ but typically a place away from home for the majority of its inhabitants.”⁸ Thus, the sojourning nature of urban-dwelling Chinese, and their strong ties with their native-place communities, prevented them from developing an shared urban culture of their own that transcended particularistic ties. In other words, these particularistic groups impeded “the fusion of urban dwellers into a homogenous status group.”⁹

These are the very notions addressed by William Rowe in his book, Hankow: Commerce and Society in a Chinese City; however, Rowe takes rather a different view of the Chinese situation. In fact, he disagrees fundamentally with Weber on several points. First, Rowe maintains that Weber’s scenario ignores the possibility of the existence of different cities across China geared to different functions, for example, one to imperial administration and another to commerce and trade. This oversight, according to Rowe, stems largely from the fact that Weber provides only for two types of settlements, cities and villages, and allows for no urban degrees in between.¹⁰ As proof of the magnitude of this oversight, Rowe proffers G. William Skinner’s “central-place” theory, which posits that the increasing differentiation of China’s urban structures occurred alongside the gradual commercialization of the Chinese world.¹¹ More significant, according to Rowe, was Skinner’s suggestion that different cities with different purposes also occupied different places in China’s administrative and

⁸ Weber, *The Religions*, 90.

⁹ Weber, *The City*, 97.

¹⁰ Rowe, *Commerce and Society*, 7.

¹¹ A more detailed explanation of Skinner’s theory can be found his article, G. William Skinner, “Marketing and Social Structure in Rural China, Parts I, II, and III,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 24, no 1 (Nov 1964); 24, no 2 (Feb 1965); 24, no 3 (May 1965). Although modern urban scholarship has gone a long way towards significantly discrediting the rigidity of Skinner’s proposed urban hierarchy, his notion that cities of different sizes performed different economic and commercial functions has been largely unassailed.

commercial hierarchies. In other words, Rowe claims that Skinner's notion allows for a more nuanced comparison of Chinese cities of roughly equivalent size. Rowe explains, "Thus, an urban center whose position in the administrative hierarchy was disproportionately higher than its position in the marketing hierarchy would be likely to have a very different social structure from one in which the relative hierarchical rankings were reversed."¹²

By using the Chinese city Hankou as his model, Rowe strives to show how Hankou not only deviates from Weber's autocratic model, but to emphasize how, in this atypical Chinese city, imperial administrators actively supported the modernization of Hankou's commercial interests and operations across a broad range of commercial ventures.¹³ In fact, in the second volume of his remarkable urban study, Hankow: Conflict and Community in a Chinese City, Rowe goes so far as to suggest that this fledgling "modernity" exhibited in Hankou constituted a form of "public sphere," along the lines of Habermas's European ideal.

Rowe's powerful and persuasive foray into Chinese history's civil society debate charted a new path for other scholars of Chinese local rural and urban elite; however, it did not go unopposed. In particular, the noted Chinese historian Frederic Wakeman took issue with a number of Rowe's assertions, a disagreement ranging from the theoretical applicability of Habermas's public sphere in the Chinese case to whether or not Hankow even constituted a city in the first place. According to Wakeman, Rowe's assertions about the existence in Hankow of a "broader urban community" with which merchant guilds "increasingly sought to identify their [own] interests"¹⁴ bears no validity because the merchant guilds in question were not themselves natives of Hankou. Urban community, Wakeman suggests, is impossible

¹² Rowe, *Commerce and Society*, 9.

¹³ Rowe, *Commerce and Society*, 10.

¹⁴ Rowe, *Commerce and Society*, 10.

when the community in question is comprised of sojourners who were not only alien to the city, but who maintained other residences in their native places during the commercial off-season.¹⁵ In fact, whether unconsciously or deliberately, Wakeman's response to this phenomenon echoes the stand originally taken by Max Weber when he claimed that particularistic groups impeded "the fusion of urban dwellers into a homogenous status group."¹⁶

In the context of urban Chinese history, this dissertation pertains directly to the enduring questions of the public sphere and civil society debates that have been raised by these prominent scholars of China. Is Max Weber right about Chinese differing from Westerners in their failure to achieve institutional autonomy from the state? Is he correct when he attributes that failure to the unsuccessful modernization of the commercial practices of Chinese merchants and their unwillingness to relinquish kinship or other particularistic ties as a prerequisite for mercantile relationships? Is William Rowe correct in tackling the shortcomings of Weber's paradigm so directly? Did the Chinese guilds of Hankou achieve institutional autonomy from the state, as Rowe has suggested, or is Frederic Wakeman justified in his skepticism? Did Rowe's evidence fail to show that Chinese guilds or any other non-state institutions attained autonomy from the state in Hankou? As Wakeman has suggested, should we completely set aside Habermas' notion of public sphere as a concept for understanding Chinese history?

Historians and social scientists specializing in China have debated these issues widely, and a rich body of historiography addresses all of these questions in various forms; however, to the best of my knowledge, historians of Asia have yet to raise these questions with respect to Chinese communities outside of China. Have overseas

¹⁵ Wakeman, "The Civil Society," 117-8.

¹⁶ Weber, *The City*, 97.

Chinese communities devised non-state institutions that have gone beyond the particularism of family and native place associations? If so, have these institutions achieved autonomy from the state in countries outside of China? Have these institutions created a public sphere? Each of the 9 chapters of this dissertation attempts to address these questions by examining the scope and functions of the Chinese congregations, or *huiguan*, operating in three regions of French Indochina during the colonial period, or, more precisely, between 1870 and 1945. In so doing, this dissertation hopes to shed some light on the degree of autonomy accessible not only to urban overseas Chinese elite, but also to Indochina's overseas Chinese communities at large.

When traditional imperial authority vanished in Indochina, to be replaced by the autocratic colonial power of the French, what happened to the Chinese? To what degree were Indochina's overseas Chinese able to attain autonomy from the dominance of the French colonial state? Did overseas Chinese institutions manage to adapt the French institutional form of the congregation to meet the needs of their own communities, even if those needs went against the wishes of the French? Did they achieve some degree of autonomy vis-à-vis the French colonial government, and if so, did this autonomy represent a type – or even a proto-type – of public sphere? In the final analysis, were Indochina's overseas Chinese able to create a public sphere?

CHAPTER 1: CHINESE CONGREGATIONS, FRENCH COLONIAL AUTHORITIES, AND THE INDOCHINESE MILIEU

Even supposing that France gains nothing, we will have at least been the laborers in a providential effort on this globe if we have brought back life, agriculture and man into regions given up to banditry and sterility, if we have made these rivers the conduits of transport . . . if we have exploited these forests and revived these fertile but uncultivated valleys.¹⁷

Hubert Lyautey

The key to understanding Chinese politics and society in French colonial Indochina lies in the institution of the congregation. This institution attained its final official form throughout Indochina on October 5, 1871, when French authorities passed a law requiring every Chinese to belong to a congregation, and it continued to be the focus of interactions between the French and the Chinese for the next three-quarters of a century – until 1954 when French colonial rule in Indochina came to an end. During this period, Chinese made many uses of congregations, and their appropriations and reinterpretations of congregations are the subject of the following chapters of this dissertation. But before considering how Chinese used the congregation system to their own advantage, it is important to understand why the French adopted the congregation system in the first place and how they relied upon congregations to extend their rule throughout Indochina.

¹⁷ General Hubert Lyautey, as quoted in Robert Aldrich, *Greater France: A History of French Overseas Expansion* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), 138. Most famous for his long years of service in and love of Africa, including an appointment as the first resident General of Morocco, Lyautey also served as an officer and an administrator in Tonkin from 1894-1897, where he led troops along the Chinese border to suppress the Black Flag rebellions and later served as head of the Government General's military office in Indochina. Robert Aldrich, *Greater France: A History of French Overseas Expansion* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), 134-138.

French Decision to Adopt Congregations

The relationship between Indochina's overseas Chinese community and the French had its own watershed moments, most often marked by legislation enacted by French authorities with the intention of solidifying their control over resident Chinese. The legislative interference of the French vis-à-vis the membership, scale, and responsibilities of local Indochinese associations and organizations informed the scope and function of these institutions to a considerable degree, causing the congregations of Indochina to differ from typical overseas Chinese *huiguan* in one significant respect: French law mandated their existence, their organizational and leadership structures, and their official roles within the colonial society.

The French began promulgating laws concerning the Chinese in Cochinchina within months of their assumption of power in the provinces surrounding Saigon and Cholon. On April 14, 1863, the Annamite emperor Tu Duc attempted to preserve the sovereignty of Annam by placating the French, ceding to France the provinces of Bien-hoa, Gia-dinh, and Mytho, as well as the Poulo Condore islands. Four months after they became custodians of the three provinces, on August 11, 1863, the French administration passed the first colonial law ever to concern Chinese congregations in the newly acquired territory, and three more laws joined this law on the books over the next two years.¹⁸ Although the French had taken possession of three provinces of Cochinchina, another three provinces along the southern coast and the Cambodian border remained nominally in Annamite hands; however, this territory, comprised of the provinces of Vinh-long, Chau-Đoc, and Ha-tien, had been completely cut off from

¹⁸ Nguyen Quoc Dinh, *The Chinese Congregations in French Indochina*, tr. Claude Reed (New Haven, CT: Human Relations Area Files, 197?), 45. The four laws concerning Chinese congregations were dated August 11, 1863, February 4, 1863, November 1, 1863, and April 12, 1865 and can be located in the *Bulletin Officiel de la Cochinchine* for 1862, 1863, and 1865.

the Annamite kingdom by the cession of territory to the French.¹⁹ Within three years of acquiring their first territorial foothold in Cochinchina, the French extended their control across the entire territory when they used the excuse of social disorder to occupy the remaining three provinces of Cochinchina. In the case of Vinh-long, Bien-hoa, and Chau-Đoc, the French did not wait to acquire legal possession of the region to begin legislating the affairs of the provinces. The French military asserted control over the provinces in 1867 and retained their de facto control until the three provinces were officially ceded to France in 1874.²⁰

In the years prior to 1871, the French had debated their colonial position with regard to congregational membership and had even enacted some preliminary regulations, but their ultimate approach to managing the overseas Chinese had not yet been formalized. In 1862 and 1863, early Cochinchinese laws of French design summarily abolished the former imperial practice of requiring congregational membership. In other words, whether intentionally or unintentionally, the social and organizational restrictions that had been put into place by the Nguyễn dynasty were actually removed, essentially allowing the Chinese unfettered access to the mercantile spoils of the new order. But French magnanimity quickly fell victim to Sino-French competition on local economic and administrative fronts as the French began first to examine their options for control and then to apply this control to the Chinese residing in their territories.

As early as 1871, a full three years before the French consolidated their control over the colony, French laws having to do with the congregations were extended to include Chinese living in all six provinces of French controlled Cochinchina.²¹ The

¹⁹ Nguyen Quoc Dinh, *The Chinese Congregations*, 45.

²⁰ Bien-hoa, Vinh-long and Chau Đoc were given to the French upon the signing of the Treaty of Saigon, March 15, 1874.

²¹ Nguyen Quoc Dinh, *The Chinese Congregations*, 46.

passing of this law on October 5, 1871 represented the formal birth of the French congregation system, extending the system's reach across French-controlled Cochinchina and formally launching the two most fundamental components of the colonial congregation system. First, it officially recognized seven Chinese congregations, the congregations of Canton, Fukien, Hakka, Hainan, Trieu-chau, Phuoc-chau, and Quinh-chau.²² Second, it established that all Chinese nationals residing in Cochinchina were required by law to belong to one of the seven congregations if they desired to remain in the country. Chinese citizens employed by European firms were the only exception to this law.²³ Although a number of other laws in later years developed and refined the French system of monitoring and controlling the overseas Chinese,²⁴ the 1871 law created the very first pitch upon which the game of Franco-Chinese relations within Indochina would be played throughout the colonial period. As the fundamental organizational component of Indochina's Chinese community, congregations were unique to Indochina, although similar groups of Chinese existed wherever large native place communities settled outside of China.²⁵ As evidenced by the picture below, these Chinese communities built *huiguan*, or meeting halls, that served their communities in Indochina.

²² The seven official congrégations were later reduced to five, when the Phuoc-chau and Quinh-chau groups were removed from the list.

²³ Nguyen Quoc Dinh, *The Chinese Congregations*, 46.

²⁴ A second law governing Chinese congrégations in Indochina, also quite notable, was the declaration made on January 23, 1885 by the Governor of Cochinchina within which no less than seven articles exclusively addressed the regulation of Chinese congrégations. Nguyen Quoc Dinh, *The Chinese Congregations*, 46.

²⁵ These groups, known as *huiguan* or *bang* in Chinese, were comprised of members speaking the same dialects and from the same (or similar) subethnic places in China. They existed within China as well, in major urban centers, although in Southeast Asian cities the divisions between subethnic places tended to be less refined than within China proper. In other words, whereas Cantonese *huiguan* in a city like Shanghai might have been divided along lines as specific as village, county, or occupation, in Southeast Asia, the population of overseas Chinese generally did not support such precise segmentation. In terms of occupational segmentation, communities like the Hakka of West Borneo were comprised almost entirely of miners (see Yuan Bingling, *Chinese Democracies: A Study of the Kongsis of West Borneo*,



Figure 1 Cantonese Temple in Cholon.²⁶

The establishment of the 1871 law represents a watershed moment for French laws governing the Chinese. Some French sources attribute this revision of policy to an attempt to encourage Chinese immigration in order to meet the urgent demand for manual labor in Cochinchina at the time of the French occupation,²⁷ but this notion seems somehow insufficient. The basic economic situation of Cochinchina and the financial networks exploited by many of the Chinese living there meant, essentially, that hiring indigenous laborers proved far more economical than hiring Chinese laborers for any given task. Although early French investors and colons might have preferred to rely on more expensive but better connected Chinese labor in establishing

1776-1884 (Leiden: Research School of Asian, African and Amerindian Studies, Universiteit Leiden, 2000) for more on these Chinese settlers) and Singapore's Chinese, such as the bricklayers of Taishan county, also occasionally divided along occupational lines; however, even in Cochinchina, Indochina's Chinese population combined with strict French control of the Chinese population to limit professional segmentation as a category that only existed inside the structure of the congregation and never equaled or superseded it.

²⁶ Picture taken by author on 2001 trip through Cholon

²⁷ Nguyen Quoc Dinh, *The Chinese Congregations*, 56.

their colonial infrastructure, it seems unlikely that it would have taken the French nearly ten years to see the economic realities of Cochinchinese labor.

It is, perhaps, more likely that the fledgling colonial administration sought to depart from a long-established Nguyễn imperial policy in an attempt to forge its own relationship with the powerful and well-connected Chinese merchants and businessmen whose businesses and networks had been, to varying degrees, a critical component of the economic stability of the Mekong Delta. In any case, according to a colonial French account, when the number of Chinese immigrants increased considerably and began to include individuals labeled as “dangerous” and “troublemakers,” the original Annamite law was reworked by the French and reinstated to require congregational affiliations.²⁸ Mandatory affiliation also tacitly removed the congregations of Phuoc-chau and Quinh-chau from the list of acceptable affiliations by mandating that all immigrants had to belong to one of the five remaining congregations in order to continue to reside in Cochinchina.²⁹ In fact, the French actually extended the Nguyen congregation model beyond the Chinese for whom it had originally been intended, eventually including Indians, non-indigenous Muslims, and Japanese on the list of groups requiring “congregational” representation.

On January 23, 1885, the system of mandatory congregational affiliation was finally cemented into place in Cochinchina. This law, which will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter, became the blueprint for all future Chinese legislation in the colony. As a result of this law and the 1887 establishment of the Government General of Indochina, the period between 1885 and 1887 effectively

²⁸ Nguyen Quoc Dinh, *The Chinese Congregations*, 56.

²⁹ Nguyen Quoc Dinh, *The Chinese Congregations*, 57. To the best of my knowledge, after the promulgation of this law in 1885, the five congregations of Canton, Hainam, Hakka, Phuoc-kien, and Trieu-chau became the standards for fulfilling the membership requirements in all subsequent laws promulgated by the French with regard to the requirement of congregational affiliation.

marks the true beginning of the tactical maneuverings between Indochina's Chinese community and the French. While Sino-French interaction before this time had possessed significance, especially in the colony of Cochinchina which acted as the proving ground for French colonial policy vis-à-vis the overseas Chinese, those early interactions represented a testing phase, where long established Chinese communities interacted with newly established French administrators to attempt to define the boundaries of their working relationship. After the mid-1880's, however, the real jockeying for advantage began. In other words, while the 1887 establishment of the Government general marked a watershed in the history of French control over Indochina, for the overseas Chinese residing there, the most significant moment arguably occurred two years earlier, in 1885.

Patterns of French Control in Indochina

The remainder of this chapter will reorient our focus, widening in scope to include a general overview of French conquest in the region. This more general discussion is significant not just as background to our larger investigation, but also as a mirror of the patterns of expansion followed by the French in their assertion of control over Indochina's resident Chinese. The institution of the congregation system followed closely on the heels of the gradual extension of French control in the five regions of Indochina, and the establishment of the French administrative hierarchy gives a clear picture of the authoritative ladder to which Indochina's Chinese were subordinate. In addition, a brief outline of the geographically-based hierarchy established by the French colons raises interesting questions about French patterns of control and the Chinese response to those patterns.

France's relationship with Indochina developed as much by serendipity as colonial design. In France, popular sentiments toward colonial expansion were generally indifferent at best, and often, as the unfortunate careers of several of

Indochina's early administrators reveal, downright antipathetical. The occupation and annexation of large tracts of Tonkin and Cochinchina were more representative of *reaction* than of *action*, a result of fierce competition with the British across the globe as well as in Asia, and the ever-present evangelical influence of the Roman Catholic Church. In fact, the Church herself eventually ensured France's colonial foothold in Indochina, colonialism motivated by trade but justified by the need to protect Catholic missionaries in the area.

The British occupation of Hong Kong and the persecution of French missionaries in China caused a waxing of French interest in Asia, a circumstance that coincided directly with new aggressively anti-Catholic policies undertaken by the Nguyễn regime. Whether their concern was legitimate or pretextual, the French used the protection of their missionaries as the justification for attacking Vietnam. In the summer of 1858, a French fleet led by Admiral Rigault de Genouilly occupied Tourane³⁰ but disease plagued his troops and he moved south to Saigon early the following year. More pressing events in Europe, Africa, and China diverted the attention of Napoleon III for a few years, but in 1862, Saigon and three of Cochinchina's provinces were ceded to the French. In 1867, acting on his own recognizance, the French commander at Saigon occupied the other three provinces, bringing all of Cochinchina under French control.

While consolidating their hold on Cochinchina, the French turned their attention to Cambodia as well. Torn between the French and the Siamese and threatened with open rebellion by his own half brother Si Votha, the young Cambodian King Norodom accepted a French protectorate over his nation in 1863. Despite the reluctant acquiescence of the young king, it took another two decades for the French to establish themselves as Cambodia's true authorities. During this time,

³⁰ Present-day Đà Nẵng.

French expansion into Tonkin also began in earnest, first with the ill-fated occupation of Hanoi by Francis Garnier in 1872. In 1883, Henri de Rivière led more serious attempt to capture Hanoi, but although he met with more military success, he, as with Garnier before him, was killed in the fighting.³¹ Disgraced yet again in the quest for control in Tonkin, the French then turned their full military attention to the area. The final result of the full-fledged French invasion was the establishment of a formal protectorate over both Tonkin and Annam; however, despite their nominal control over Tonkin, violent resistance in the Tonkinese Alps and along the Chinese border continued for two decades after the establishment of the protectorates, lasting into the early years of the 20th century.³²

Despite continuing unrest along the Tonkin-China border, the French established the Government General of Indochina in 1887, consolidating the administration of the three more recently acquired protectorates of Cambodia, Tonkin, and Annam with Cochinchina's colonial government.³³ The following map provides an holistic overview of the patterns and timeline of the French conquest of Indochina. The chronology of the French occupation of Indochina, as well as their periodic

³¹ Both Garnier and Rivière were killed by Chinese “Black Flag” soldiers.

³² More specific details of the French conquests in Indochina and their Asian antecedents can be found in dozens of sources, including the following: Aldrich, *Greater France*; John F. Cady, *The Roots of French Imperialism in Eastern Asia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967); Norman G. Owen, *The Emergence of Modern Southeast Asia: A New History* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2005); Herbert Priestley, *France Overseas: A Study of Modern Imperialism* (New York: D. Appleton-Century Co., 1939); Stephen H. Roberts, *The History of French Colonial Policy, 1870-1925* (London: Cass & Co., Ltd, 1963).

³³ The transformation of Laos into a French protectorate was undertaken largely as a result of the efforts of the French explorer and diplomat Auguste Pavie, whose close relationship with Laotian authorities gave the French the advantage in securing control of that country and opposing the historical influence of Siam. Laos was finally brought into the fold of the Indochinese Government General in 1897. As Laos possessed only a very small Chinese population until very late in the colonial period, it is not really a significant part of the story of Indochina's Chinese congregations. A firsthand account of the story of French involvement in Laos can be found in Auguste Pavie's extensive journals (published in English in various forms by White Lotus Press).

assertions of control over Indochina's overseas Chinese population, directly tell the story of Sino-French relations in Indochina; however, to achieve a clearer understanding of the intricate interplay between colonialists and compradors, geography and the colonial administrative hierarchy are just as important as time. Whether intentional or unintentional, the French Government General constructed a vast colonial pyramid of geographic and administrative authority intended to deal with colonial issues. This chapter will now briefly turn our attention to issues of geography, demography, and colonial personnel in order to convey a clearer idea of the state of the territories with regard to the interaction between the overseas Chinese and the French.

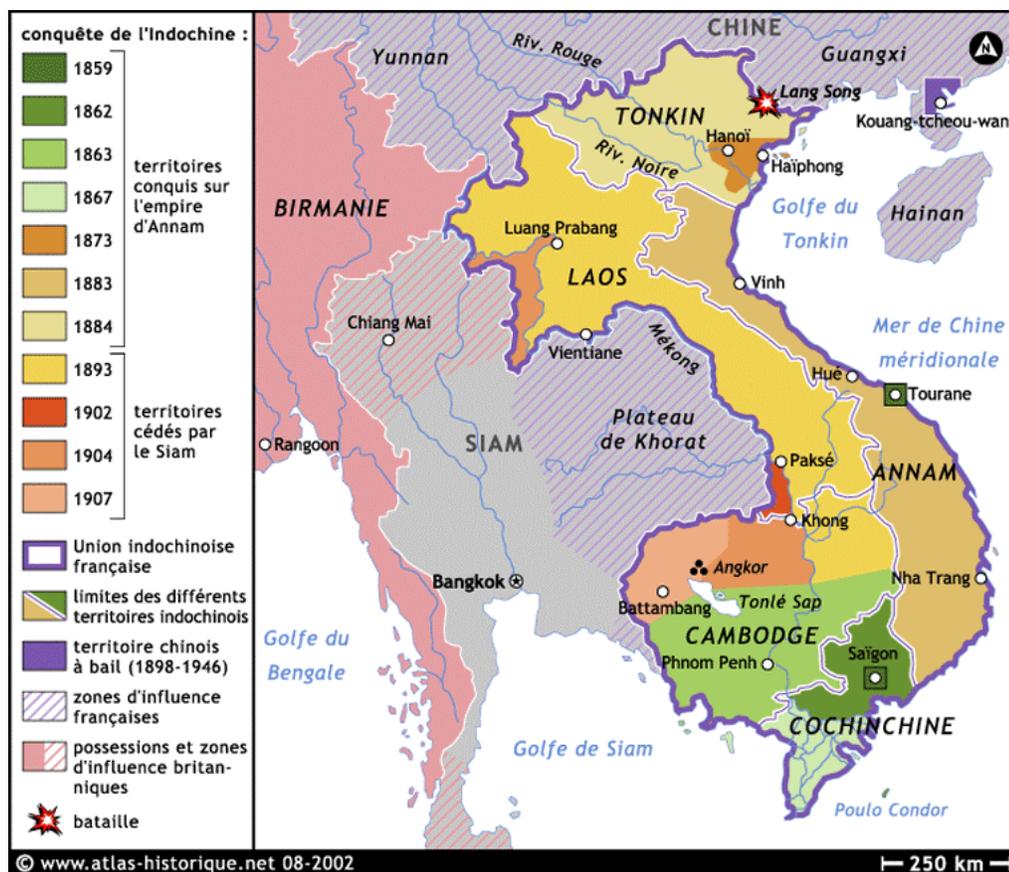


Figure 2. French Conquest in Indochina³⁴

³⁴ http://www.atlas-historique.net/1815-1914/cartes_popups/IndochineConqueteGF.html. Feb 12, 2006.

As evidenced by the preceding map, the French exerted control over the various regions of Indochina gradually over a fairly extended period of time. Administratively speaking, the French colonial apparatus was complex and hierarchical, but also occasionally internally oppositional when it came to on-the-ground relationships with local Chinese communities. Directives from Paris carried the most weight in the colonies, although typically, the Governor General easily persuaded the French government into specific courses of action. When Governor Le Myre de Vilers assumed control of the colony of Cochinchina at the start of the Third Republic, he instituted the Colonial Council to act as a check upon the possible future irresponsibility of a Governor General.³⁵ While the success of his attempt at creating checks and balances remains open to debate, the Colonial Council became a significant player in the governance of and direction taken by the French territories of Indochina.

The Governor General himself was master of the territories, and the Lieutenant Governor of Cochinchina and the Residents Superior of Tonkin, Annam, Cambodia, and Laos were his direct subordinates. In practice, and perhaps in theory as well, the Lieutenant Governor of Cochinchina wielded greater power and influence than the Residents Superior. This is likely explained by two considerations: first, Cochinchina, unlike the other four regions, was a direct colony rather than a Protectorate; and second, Cochinchina was integral to the financial life of the colony in a way that the other regions were not, not only because of its production capacities, but also because of its role as a major Southeast Asian regional entrepôt.

Provincial Administrators rested beneath the Governors and Residents on the colonial hierarchy, and they were the direct representatives of the French government in the provinces. In some areas, as was the case with northern Tonkin after the

³⁵ Virginia Thompson, *French Indo-China* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1942), 59.

establishment of the Government General but before the pacification of the area, individual provinces were ruled by Military Commanders who wielded both civil and military authority in their jurisdictions. A provincial administrator's billet was a thankless task, carried out by men who, more often than not, were overwhelmed by the ceaseless demands made on their office, both by their subordinates and by their superiors. Assistant Administrators were often appointed to support the Administrators in their tasks; these men generally only came to the fore when the Administrator was away, or when they were involved in direct conflicts with him. These men were fundamentally responsible for ensuring peace and prosperity in their bailiwicks, and the seemingly endless flow of correspondence sent to their Governors or Residents concerning the smallest details of provincial events provides fertile ground for exploring the day-to-day workings in their regions.

The task of governing large cities fell to each city's mayor and to the Municipal Councils. Only the largest cities had mayors, among them Saigon, Cholon, Hanoi, and Haiphong. While the mayors were always French, the Municipal Councils enjoyed a more diverse membership, including Frenchmen, indigenous people, and, when urban demographics warranted it, overseas Chinese. On the city level, powerful tensions between the colonial administrations and local representatives are most apparent. Particularly in the case of Cholon, city mayors tended to view the Chinese far more sympathetically than did their counterparts in the Government General. This phenomenon was due, no doubt, to the fact that the overseas Chinese community played such a socially significant role in ensuring the welfare of the urban community. Chinese congregations built hospitals, tended to the poor, built schools, and contributed to French projects of all kinds, and accordingly, prominent Chinese individuals developed close working relationships with municipal administrators. This tendency was most apparent in the long, turn-of-the-century career of Cholon's

Mayor Drouhet, who supported the Chinese community in the city and received support from it in turn.

Mayors and Councilmen might have governed cities, but police controlled them, preserving order and ferreting out crime and improprieties with an often astonishing vigor. Municipalities had their own police forces, but local and colonial police were largely under the jurisdiction of the Government General. In Indochina, the Sûreté represented the law enforcement pinnacle, an impressively effective intelligence and policing organization with a complex network of informants and agents throughout Asia. From Vietnamese revolutionaries apprehended on the streets of Hong Kong or Shanghai to Chinese anarchists detained in Hanoi, the Sûreté dealt with France's most imperative political or criminal issues; however, despite the existence of such a fearsome regulatory body, the vast majority of the police that appear in archival sources were merely cops walking the daily beats, stumbling across malfeasance when they least expected it and using human intelligence – from French, Vietnamese, or Chinese informants – to do their jobs.³⁶

In the geographical hierarchy, Paris stood unchallenged at the top of the colonial mountain. While the importance of colonies might wax or wane over time, the prestige of the motherland remained an ever-present concern, a focus that perhaps explains why France's colonial efforts generally occurred in response to the actions of other world powers rather than as a result of any rigid French ideology of conquest. As French historian Robert Aldrich notes, France's imperial inclinations were thwarted by the "lack of unanimity inside France about the proper course of action to follow in expansion, or indeed whether it suited France to acquire and preserve far-

³⁶ While most – though not all – policemen appearing in archival documents were French, local indigenous police also patrolled the streets of Indochina, keeping order and defending neighborhoods and communities from petty crime.

flung imperial domains at all.”³⁷ In light of France’s own domestic political instability, her inability to formulate and stick with a coherent imperial policy is understandable. Aldrich continues, “From the conquest of Algiers in 1830 to decolonisation of Algeria in 1962, France endured significant political turmoil, several revolutions and a bewildering number of regimes: Restoration, July Monarchy, Second Republic, Second Empire, Third Republic, Vichy collaboration and German occupation during the Second World War, the Fourth Republic, and the Fifth Republic.”³⁸ Colonial struggles resulted in the abrupt recalls to Paris of a number of Indochina’s Governors General and the attempts to pacify Tonkin even caused the collapse of the government of Prime Minister Jules Ferry in 1885.³⁹ Thus, domestic instability, rapidly changing domestic priorities vis-à-vis colonial expansion, and no coherent strategy for empire-making forced Indochina’s governors to direct their territories while constantly glancing over their shoulders to gauge the reactions of the French masses, the incumbent administration in Paris, or France’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Prior to the establishment of the Government General in 1887, French interests in Indochina were governed from Saigon, where the French Governor of Cochinchina resided; however, after 1887, when Tonkin and Annam were brought into the colonial fold, the French moved their headquarters to Hanoi, building a new governor’s palace and reducing stewardship over Cochinchina to a Lieutenant Governor’s spot. While this transfer of authority to the north ostensibly meant that Hanoi took precedence over Saigon, the distance of more than one thousand kilometers between the two cities meant that the Lieutenant Governor, despite resting under the authority of Hanoi’s Governor, still controlled an area of tremendous value in terms of trade and

³⁷ Aldrich, *Greater France*, 90.

³⁸ Aldrich, *Greater France*, 90.

³⁹ Aldrich, *Greater France*, 97.

agriculture. More to the point, Saigon lay just downriver from a city that early French explorers referred to as the *Bazar Chinois*, but this city, known in Vietnamese as Chợ Lớn or, literally, Big Market, laid claim to a vibrant and energetic trade, as well as the largest established population of overseas Chinese in the five territories of Indochina. The following map is a 1790 representation of Saigon and the *Bazar Chinois*, giving some idea as to their proximity and locations along the local waterways.

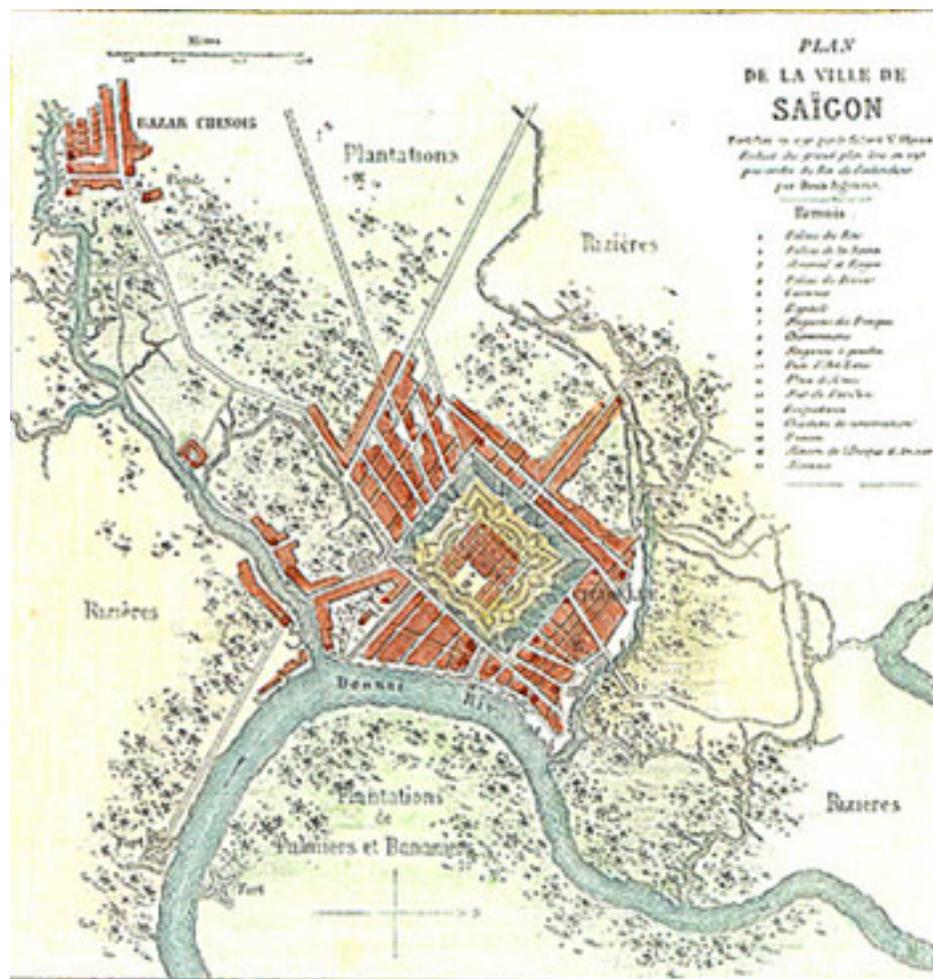


Figure 3 Map of Saigon⁴⁰

⁴⁰http://www.oldsiamtrading.com/Merchant2/merchant.mvc?Screen=CTGY&Store_Code=oldsiamtrading&Category_Code=maantiquar. Feb 12, 2006

Eventually, as urban sprawl caused these cities to meet, they became collectively incorporated as Saigon-Cholon, although each had its own mayor and municipal councils well into the 20th century. Just as the establishment of the Government General favored Hanoi over Saigon, from a French perspective, the colonial administration of Cochinchina preferred Saigon over Cholon; however, from the perspective of overseas Chinese demographics, exactly the opposite was true. From a military perspective, headquartering in Saigon was quite sensible because of the established fort and garrisoned troops that could offer immediate and decisive support in the event of a violent confrontation between French officers or officials and local indigenous communities; however, other less obvious reasons might have played a role as well. In fact, the French selection of Saigon as their center of power in the area could also be indirectly attributable to French desire to avoid the Chinese domain. Such reluctance likely had its origins in two phenomena. The first is the overt repugnance expressed by the French for areas settled or controlled by the overseas Chinese. This disgust had its roots in French stereotypes depicting the Chinese as plague-ridden and unclean, a view that will be analyzed in more detail in Chapter 5 of this dissertation; however, I would like to suggest that French racial typing also informed the second phenomenon that led to French avoidance of Chinese dominated areas. The perception of overseas Chinese as greedy and possessed of pecuniary cunning might well have led the French to stake claim to their own territory outside the traditional bailiwick of the Cholon Chinese. In either case, it is certain that the French viewed Indochina's Chinese as a force to be reckoned with.

In 1901, French censuses estimated the Chinese population of Cochinchina at 91,727 people, but that number did not include another 40,632 people who were of mixed Chinese and Vietnamese heritage.⁴¹ In February 1902, the city of Hanoi

⁴¹ Population of Cochinchina, 27 December 1901, CAOM, INDO GGI 20542.

boasted 1,900 Chinese residents in a total population of 127,114.⁴² By 1926, the Chinese population had exploded in all regions of the Colonies. In Cochinchina, numbers of Chinese increased by 150%, resulting in a Chinese population of around 250,000. With 95,000 Chinese in Cambodia and 48,000 in Tonkin, the Chinese had become a significant foreign presence in the Colonies. The total Chinese population of the five French controlled regions numbered 405,000 and Chinese continued to enter the colony in great numbers.⁴³ 33,800 Chinese immigrated to Cochinchina in 1926 alone.⁴⁴

For the French, the resident Chinese were a bit of a two-edged sword. On the one hand, they had established pre-existing trade networks and relationships throughout Indochina and had a long tradition of competition with the indigenous populations for economic supremacy. The existence of a substantial foreign population concerned primarily with its own economic interests gave the French immediate, if limited, access to trading routes and markets that they would have had great difficulty accessing so quickly on their own. When it came to rice production, fisheries, and other staple industries, major Chinese firms dispatched agents into the countryside at harvest time to buy the entire rice crop of rural villages. After returning to Cholon or another city with their purchase, the firms proceeded to sell the rice in Indochina or on the world market, achieving a form of vertical integration by means of monopolizing responsibility for every task but the actual farming.⁴⁵ On the other hand, the Chinese population enjoyed numbers large enough to make it a significant threat to French economic and political authority, a dilemma that became increasingly apparent as the 20th century progressed.

⁴² Population of the City of Hanoi, 15 February 1902, CAOM, INDO GGI 20542.

⁴³ Letter from the Director of Economic Affairs, 13 July 1927, CAOM, INDO GGI 55164.

⁴⁴ Chinese Immigration in Cochinchina, 31 July 1927, CAOM, INDO GGI 55164.

⁴⁵ Thompson, *French Indo-China*, 169.

Only three out of five territories in Indochina possessed a Chinese population of sufficient magnitude to make it of serious concern to the French: Cochinchina, Cambodia, and Tonkin. As will be demonstrated throughout this thesis, the Chinese of Cambodia, while self-governing and ruled independently by the French under the standard congregation system, were largely subordinate to the Chinese of Cochinchina when matters of international or community-wide politics came to the fore. In fact, in many respects, the overseas Chinese of Cochinchina and Cambodia were easier to govern; access to those territories was primarily by sea and could be more strictly controlled. Many of Indochina's wealthiest and most respected businessmen made their profits from dealings in Cochinchina and Cambodia and, therefore, had a vested interest in law and order as it pertained to the local Cochinchinese communities of overseas Chinese.

Tonkin's situation was much more complicated. The immense border with China stretches more than one thousand kilometers along the southern Chinese province of Guangxi alone, a circumstance that made controlling Chinese migration into the Protectorate nearly impossible. The dense alpine terrain made a perfect safe haven for smugglers, criminals fleeing Chinese officials, criminals fleeing French retribution, or the less nefarious vagrant wanderers who populated the region. Large bands of anti-Qing revolutionaries found refuge in Tonkin's mountains in the early 20th century, a circumstance that frequently aggravated relations between France and the Celestial Empire. Wealthy Chinese merchants in Hanoi and Haiphong refused to take responsibility for the actions of Chinese elsewhere in the region and the French had no choice but to accept their reluctance. After all, it had taken French authorities well over a decade to achieve control over far north Tonkin's villages and highways. As one turn-of-the-century colonial publication noted, "This border is not a natural boundary. It cuts one country in two, the two parts of which are absolutely similar

from the point of view of the terrain and of the inhabitants, and is nothing more than the limit of the centuries-old encroachment of the Chinese upon the Empire of Annam.”⁴⁶ As the following map demonstrates, the long and winding Sino-Tonkin border rests entirely in the mountains and is sparsely populated, settled only in the form of small towns and villages from Laos all the way to the South China Sea:



Figure 4 Map of Border⁴⁷

Arguably, the porousness of that border region remains to this day. In the high country of far northern Vietnam, along the Chinese border, Hmong and Dzaio women still sell traditional fabrics adorned with Chinese coins and baubles, and an afternoon spent watching the bridge between Lao Cai in Vietnam and Hekou in China reveals a ceaseless stream of pedestrian and bicycle traffic, each individual laden with refrigerators, air-conditioners, or washing machines, heading into Vietnam for villages unknown.

⁴⁶ *Notice Sur le Kouang-Si Rédigée à l'Etat Major des Troupes de l'Indochine* (Hanoi: F.-H. Schneider, Imprimeur-Éditeur, 1900), 33.

⁴⁷ http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/middle_east_and_asia/china_vietnam_border_88.jpg. Feb 12, 2006.

French Strategies for Controlling the Overseas Chinese

As French colonialism took its course, each component of the Indochinese colony established its own specific regulations intended to govern the Chinese in their individual territories. Laws controlling all aspects of the membership and institutional lives of the congregations emerged gradually as each region succumbed to French colonial ambitions. After the completion of the French conquest, initial, regionally-specific regulations were adopted in Cochinchina on October 16, 1906, in Tonkin on December 12, 1913, in Laos on January 7, 1919, in Cambodia on November 15, 1919, and on September 25, 1928 in Annam.⁴⁸ Not until 1935 did the French use the excuse of the establishment of the Union of Indochina to promulgate one law intended to govern all Chinese in French-controlled Indochina, irrespective of the individual legal differences that had previously existed.⁴⁹

Ultimately, the texts of each region's individual law underwent little revision when the law of 1935 superseded them, but the basic requirements of congregational membership, intended as an extra measure of control over what the French considered to be an otherwise suspicious population, found expression in language both redolent with contractual implications and impossible to misunderstand.

In order to gain admission into Indochina, the Chinese immigrants must be accepted into a congregation which agrees to be responsible for their personal tax, and for any fines which may be due for any reason, and which further agrees to foot the expenses of repatriation to China in case they are expelled, or in the case that the congregation no longer wishes to be responsible for them. By admitting them to membership the congregation agrees to accept these responsibilities.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Nguyen Quoc Dinh, *The Chinese Congregations*, 52-3.

⁴⁹ Nguyen Quoc Dinh, *The Chinese Congregations*, 53.

⁵⁰ GGI Arrêté, December 6, 1935: Art. 27, as appears in Nguyen Quoc Dinh, *The Chinese Congregations*, 54.

In other words, this 1935 law gives the congregation, as represented, ultimately, by its elected president, the unenviable task of vouching for the moral integrity of its members, a statement of trust on the part of the congregation made more dramatic because of the stiff penalties that would be applied to the institution if its trust were to be proven ill-advised; however, the risk to the congregation did not end with the behavior of its own members. This law obligated congregations to accept, essentially without recourse, the decisions made by French colonial authorities with regard to any malfeasance or dishonesty on the part of the overseas Chinese in Indochina. It is a law written in strong language, expressing expectations and consequences with great clarity, and, for better or for worse, it served as the keystone for Sino-French interactions in Indochina until the departure of the French in 1954.

Practically and logistically speaking, this strategy of controlling the Chinese affected them in several significant ways. Not only did it have the obvious consequence of limiting Chinese immigration to those individuals who were able to find sponsorship through a congregation, but it also meant that if a Chinese immigrant were to be at loggerheads with his congregation or choose to disassociate with it, he was required by law to either leave Indochina altogether or to accept membership in another congregation which, with very few exceptions, meant transferring his place of residence to an entirely different city or region. Furthermore, mandatory affiliation found reinforcement with policy of requiring all Chinese residents of Indochina to carry identification cards, known as *cartes de sejour* or residence permits, on their persons at all times. French authorities could demand that an immigrant produce his residence card at any time and without specific cause, and failure to comply with this regulation could result in an individual's imprisonment until his congregational chief

or the Bureau of Immigration vouched for him. If no one vouched for him, the penalty was deportation.⁵¹

As will be addressed in the following chapter, exceptions to the strict, geographically-defined congregation system existed in Tonkin, where Chinese coolie labor made for mobile populations of insufficient numbers to warrant multiple congregations based on native place but comprised numbers *too* great, in the minds of the French administration, to be left without congregational supervision. These special statutory cases included Chinese employed by Tonkin's public works, agricultural, and mining enterprises, and were designed primarily to account for the many Chinese employed in the Tonkinese mining enterprises of Hongay and Cong-trieu. For Tonkin-based Chinese laborers, single corporate congregations not differentiated by native-place fulfilled all of the roles and responsibilities required of typical, sub-ethnically defined congregations throughout the rest of Indochina.⁵²

Conclusion

Everything about the French colonial apparatus, from the administrative structures to the geographic divisions of the provinces, was designed to enhance and enable greater French control over the five territories of Indochina. In particular, using Nguyễn codes as a legislative base, French laws concerning Indochina's overseas Chinese aimed at forcing those long-established Chinese communities into a colonial cast from which deviation would be punishable by financial penalty or even expulsion from French territory. The remainder of this dissertation explores the Chinese congregations as institutions, and in so doing, examines the issue of colonial control and its effectiveness vis-à-vis Indochina's overseas Chinese.

⁵¹ Nguyen Quoc Dinh, *The Chinese Congregations*, 62-4.

⁵² Nguyen Quoc Dinh, *The Chinese Congregations*, 60-1.

From the perspective of overseas Chinese, the congregation system imposed upon Chinese communities in Indochina was essentially of foreign design. Conceived by Vietnam's Nguyễn dynasty and transformed by the interests and mores of the French, the burden of this alien system of organization and control informed the social, economic, and political operations of Indochina's Chinese communities in ways both minor and significant. By analyzing the institution of the Chinese congregation in French Indochina, this dissertation seeks to answer one basic question: as the French congregation system was imposed on Indochina, what did the Chinese make of it?

CHAPTER 2: CHINESE SUFFRAGE AND CONGREGATIONAL ELECTIONS

By examining the works of French and Indochinese legal scholars from the first half of the 20th century, this chapter traces the evolution of the electoral process within the congrégations, evaluating not only the processes themselves, but also the French policies governing those practices, as well as the role played by Indochina's Chinese community in defining and often altering electoral procedures to better suit the needs and mores of the entire Chinese community. This evaluation includes a brief discussion of the differences in electoral requirements from region to region in Indochina and also offers some insight into the reasons underlying these differing policies.

In principle, these differences revolve around the issue of suffrage. The interplay between Chinese and French ideas about voting eligibility highlights several significant points of contention between the French administration and the Chinese community over the necessity for or limitations of democratization within the Chinese congrégations. When discussing the electoral process, specific examples of contested elections provide concrete instances of electoral conflicts and disputes, which further highlight the conflict over sovereignty within the Chinese community and the willingness of the French administration to intervene in the electoral process when they disapproved of the direction being taken by a specific congrégation.

The Issue of Chinese Suffrage

For local and regional administrative purposes, a president and a vice-president whose elections were both mandated and carefully delineated by colonial law typically led congrégations. During the colonial period, voting eligibility differed from province to province according to the size and prosperity of the overseas Chinese population in any given region. In the small towns and outlying provinces outside of Cochinchina,

universal male suffrage enabled all Chinese men over the age of 18 to participate in presidential and vice-presidential elections held by the congregations with which they were affiliated.⁵³ Different electoral standards determined voting eligibility in certain special zones, including all of Cochinchina, Cambodia's Phnom Penh district, and the cities of Hanoi, Haiphong, and Nam Định in Tonkin. In these areas, only prosperous Chinese or property owners enjoyed the right to vote.⁵⁴ According to contemporaneous legal scholars in France, the rationale behind this restriction was primarily socio-economic. The French educated, Vietnamese legal scholar, Nguyen Quoc Dinh, addressed suffrage within the congregations in his book, *Les Congregations Chinoises en Indochine Francaise*. Published in 1941 based on research he compiled in the late 1920's, Nguyen's book claims,

[T]he requirements are normally more rigorous in the countries and localities when the body of the immigrants...includes a large number of rich and influential Chinese, whose economic position is important. In these regions, so that the president of the congrégation may be someone with real power and authority, he is chosen by those individuals meeting certain financial requirements. This is why there is, in addition to the preceding requirements, a system requiring ownership...⁵⁵

Despite broader similarities consisting primarily of financial requirements, Indochinese electoral policies differed considerably from region to region and the overseas Chinese themselves had input into the development of colonial policy in this regard. A brief background of electoral regulations in Cochinchina provides a more extensive elucidation of this situation.

⁵³ Universal male suffrage was the norm for all of Laos and Annam during the colonial period.

⁵⁴ Nguyen Quoc Dinh, *The Chinese Congregations*, 97.

⁵⁵ Nguyen Quoc Dinh, *The Chinese Congregations*, 97.

Overseas Chinese residing in Cochinchina enjoyed universal male suffrage in the early days of French colonization.⁵⁶ Of the four earliest laws addressing the issue of congregational elections, the first three outline no minimum requirements for voting eligibility,⁵⁷ and the fourth law, promulgated on January 23, 1885, actually confirms universal suffrage for Cochinchina when it states in Article 16 that each congregational president is to be elected by all of the Chinese “living in the neighborhood and belonging to the congrégation.”⁵⁸ Not until 27 years after the establishment of the colony did the first law appear which limited voting eligibility for the Chinese. In this law, Article 25 decrees, “all those who are for any reason exempt from the poll tax shall not be voters.”⁵⁹ While this law really only prevented a very small percentage of the Chinese from voting, namely disabled or elderly⁶⁰ people, immigrant workers residing in Cochinchina for less than one year, and agricultural workers, it proved to be the first step down a slippery slope leading to the effective abolition of universal suffrage for overseas Chinese residing in Indochina. However, the impetus behind this change was not, as might have been expected, the French administration; rather, the leaders of Indochina’s Chinese community themselves requested stricter limits on eligibility to vote in congregational elections.

As a whole, Indochina’s collected Chinese community had actively protested colonial laws that they believed infringed upon their rights or dignity from the very beginning of the French occupation of Saigon and Cholon. Not only were these protests handed directly to French officials in the form of formal petitions and

⁵⁶ Under French law, Chinese residents over 60 years of age were no longer considered contributing members of the colony and protectorates. Thus, I suspect that 60 years of age was the *de facto* limit on voting eligibility. As for the younger end of the spectrum, I could not hazard a guess.

⁵⁷ These first three laws were the decisions of February 4, 1863, and November 1, 1863, and also the law of October 5, 1871. Nguyen Quoc Dinh, *The Chinese Congregations*, 97.

⁵⁸ Nguyen Quoc Dinh, *The Chinese Congregations*, 97.

⁵⁹ Nguyen Quoc Dinh, *The Chinese Congregations*, 98.

⁶⁰ Over 60 years old

complaints,⁶¹ but they were also often forwarded to Chinese officials in a congregation's native place⁶² or even to the Chinese ambassador in Paris. From 1866, the Imperial ambassador in Paris began to present formal petitions to the French Department of Foreign Affairs on behalf of the Chinese residing in Indochina. These early petitions generally dealt with one of two subjects: the poll tax, which had increased under French rule; and the system of immigration, which required overseas Chinese to carry identification cards listing, among other things, their personal measurements, a policy from which foreign residents of other nationalities were exempt, and one which the Chinese found particularly degrading.⁶³ When Paris failed to respond to the 1866 requests, the Chinese ambassador tried again, submitting further petitions in 1892, 1893, and finally, in 1903.⁶⁴

Although the ambassador's efforts made little headway with the Paris Department of Foreign Affairs, local Cochinchinese complaints and demands evidently met with more success because in 1905, in response to the dissatisfaction of the Chinese community, the colonial government commissioned one of its officers, Charles Hardouin, to investigate the matter. Hardouin traveled extensively through British and Dutch territories in the region to examine both the overseas Chinese

⁶¹ For an example of one of these early petitions, refer to the 1866 petition presented to the French by the assembled congregations of Cholon delineating the treatment expected of the Chinese by the French. TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.17/171(8).

⁶² This was especially true in the cases of the Fukien and Cantonese Congrégations.

⁶³ The French administration strongly advocated the position of having a Chinese immigrant's personal measurements recorded and inscribed on the identification card he or she carried because they felt it aided the police in apprehending Chinese who attempted to avoid payment of the head tax, or who tried to remain in the colony without permission or congregational sponsorship. This position came from the very highest levels of the colonial service, as evidenced in a letter, dated October 12, 1895, from the Chief of the Immigration Service, Mr. J. O'Connell, to the Governor of Cochinchina in which the Immigration Chief wrote, "Fraud tends to decrease considerably from day to day as a result of registering the [distinguishing features] of the owner upon a resident's permit." TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.14/021(3).

⁶⁴ Nguyen Quoc Dinh, *The Chinese Congregations*, 47.

communities themselves and the laws governing those communities in territories colonized by other European powers. The report submitted by Hardouin upon his return to Indochina not only suggested the key step of the transforming the congrégations into organizations legally responsible for the activities and behavior of their members, but also provided the research used by the colonial government in promulgating the law of October 16, 1906, entitled, “Concerning the Congrégations,” which remained the fundamental law governing Chinese organizations in Indochina until the ratification of the Nanking agreements between 1930 and 1935. Additionally, the law of October 16, 1906, which was designed to apply only to Chinese communities existing in Cochinchina, became the blueprint for colonial laws regulating the Chinese in all five regions of Indochina.⁶⁵

What is the significance of the law of October 16, 1906, for Chinese suffrage? After Hardouin returned with his proposals, a commission composed of both members from various departments within the colonial administration and prominent Chinese in Cochinchina met to discuss his findings and determine how best to apply them. As the Chinese communities in Cochinchina were comprised largely of Chinese nationals, the Immigration Service bore responsibility for enacting and enforcing legislation involving Chinese organizations. When the question of electing congrégational officers arose, the Immigration Service referred back to the large number of Chinese complaints they had received over the past years concerning the electoral process. The bulk of these complaints originated from prosperous and prominent Chinese merchants and businessmen who resented the breadth of Chinese suffrage because “it allowed many Chinese to vote who did not merit the privilege.”⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Nguyen Quoc Dinh, *The Chinese Congregations*, 47-8.

⁶⁶ Nguyen Quoc Dinh, *The Chinese Congregations*, 98.

The commission questioned its Chinese members extensively on the subject of voting eligibility and they requested that suffrage be limited exclusively to congregation members falling into the very top bracket of the personal tax, a tax based almost entirely on income and property ownership. If the administration remained unwilling to place such exclusive limits on Chinese suffrage, then, by way of compromise, the Chinese members urged the commission at least to limit voting eligibility to Chinese falling into the top four categories of the personal tax.⁶⁷ In the end, capitulating in part to the requests presented by Cochinchina's prominent Chinese businessmen, the commission determined that voting in the cities of Saigon and Cholon would only be open to Chinese in the top four categories of the personal tax; however, the commission insisted on broader eligibility in the countryside, leaving rural eligibility open to all Chinese paying either a license fee or a land tax. These recommendations were incorporated in their entirety into the law of October 16, 1906 and can be found in Article 2 of that law, which addresses the issue of congregational elections and Chinese suffrage.⁶⁸ Thus, monied elements within the Chinese community itself were one of the primary motivating factors behind the restrictions placed upon Chinese suffrage by the French. Vestiges of the importance of these wealthy Chinese can still be seen in Indochina's Chinese temples today, where pictures of congregation leaders like the one shown below, yellowed with age and spotted by mildew, still adorn the temple walls

⁶⁷ In total, there were 6 categories of the personal tax with the bottom category reserved for those who paid neither a land tax nor a license fee. The category just above this bottom category included overseas Chinese paying a land tax or shop license of less than 10 piastres. Under the 1906 law, these small businessmen would not have been eligible to vote in the cities of Saigon and Cholon, although they would have been eligible if they lived in any region of Cochinchina outside of the two big cities.

⁶⁸ Nguyen Quoc Dinh, *The Chinese Congregations*, 98-9.



Figure 5 Leaders of Congregation⁶⁹

As with other laws before 1906, the Cochinchinese legislation was particularly important because it served as the basis for voter laws throughout Indochina. Laws concerning Chinese suffrage in the rest of Indochina varied widely from region to region, a result of the demography of Chinese settlement. Accordingly, the territories of Laos and Annam tended to address the issue only in passing while laws became increasingly specific and restrictive in Cambodia and Tonkin. In the case of Cambodia, laws of September 7, 1912, and of November 15, 1919, mandated that all voters must be on the rolls of those who pay license fees or land taxes. In Tonkin, voting restrictions were put into place in the cities of Hanoi, Haiphong, and Nam Đinh,⁷⁰ first by the laws of December 21, 1910, and December 12, 1913, which placed

⁶⁹ Picture of a framed photograph hanging on a temple wall. Picture taken by author in Cholon in 2002.

⁷⁰ According to Nguyen Quoc Dinh, Nam Đinh was only added to the list of urban areas requiring financial qualification to vote in 1925; however, the law of 1910 suggests that the French administration

increasingly strict controls on urban voting eligibility, culminating in suffrage only for those Chinese in the two highest categories of wealth.⁷¹ Liberalization of the statutes occurred with the November 11, 1924 law, which allowed the top four categories to vote. Additionally, a basic land tax or license fee requirement similar to the one in place in rural Cochinchina was instituted for Quang Yen province as a result of the large Chinese population in that region.⁷²

The Case of Tonkin

Tonkin's Chinese community proved especially complicated to regulate due to the financial realities of the region. Unlike the rest of Indochina, Tonkin played home to a rather large population of Chinese laborers and coolies.⁷³ These workers found employment in some agricultural ventures, but, as a general rule, worked in the many mines and mineral concessions scattered across Tonkin's mountainous north. This area not only possessed the mineral richness necessary to create a demand for manual labor, but enjoyed the added condition of being geographically close to China, thus providing a welcome source of employment for manual laborers from China's southern provinces and, in particular, the devastatingly poor provinces of Guangxi and Yunnan.

recognized Nam Đinh as a major urban area with a high (relatively speaking) concentration of Chinese much earlier than Nguyen's study would indicate.

⁷¹ Projet d'arrêté réglementant les Congrégations asiatiques au Tonkin, Art. IV, pp. 3-4, TTLTQG1, RST 8886.

⁷² Nguyen Quoc Dinh, *The Chinese Congregations*, 99-101.

⁷³ Despite the distance at which Tonkin lagged behind Cochinchina and Cambodia with respect to the size of its Chinese population, Tonkin's mines attracted a significant population of Chinese coolies unmatched by either Cochinchina or Cambodia. In the two southern regions, the Chinese population was associated predominantly with trade and pan-Southeast Asian mercantilism. Although some Chinese coolie labor could be found in the primarily Chinese-owned pepper plantations of Cochinchina's southernmost provinces (such as Ha Tien), indigenous laborers generally proved to be more cost effective in those areas and plantation-owners accordingly hired Cochinchinese or Annamite workers to fill the slots more typically occupied by Chinese coolies in Tonkin.

Despite labor patterns that virtually assured the presence of Chinese workers from most, if not all, of China's southern provinces, the laws governing Chinese congregations in Tonkin made specific provisions only for congregations composed of members from the Cantonese and Fujianese communities. This provision resulted from a law determining that only homogenous groups with populations exceeding 100 eligible men could form independent congregations unique to their ethnic sub-region.⁷⁴ Inevitably, this law combined with existing laws on suffrage and property ownership to privilege communities of established merchants and skilled workers based in Tonkin's larger urban centers, effectively excluding migratory laborers in the north. Also as a result of this statute, even in Tonkin's hinterlands and smaller market centers, Cantonese and Fujianese communities surface most frequently in daily records.

Generally, early information on Tonkin's upland congregations centers around congregational leadership. For example, in 1890, the president of Sontay's Fujian Congregation, a man by the name of Phoun-Lou-Mui, became seriously ill. By January of 1891, Phoun-Lou-Mui's illness had progressed to such a degree that he decided to return to China and leave Sontay, we can safely assume, forever. After his departure, on January 20, 1891, new elections were held, and the well-respected storekeeper Vinh-Hung won the presidential post by unanimous vote.⁷⁵ This story typifies the colonial concern with distant congregations. As long as the organization ran smoothly and followed the proper procedures, it only appeared briefly on the radar screen when its leadership changed.

Despite the careful detail with which they attempted to regulate Chinese communities in Tonkin, early colonial statutes failed to provide for the large numbers

⁷⁴ Projet d'arrêté réglementant les Congrégations Asiatiques au Tonkin, Art. I & II, p. 2, TTLTQG1, RST 8886.

⁷⁵ French Resident, Sontay, to Resident-Superior, Hanoi, 20 January 1891, TTLTQG1, RST 29035.

of Chinese coolies working in the region. Accordingly, the law of 1910 made specific provision for the large community of Chinese miners, declaring that any Tonkinese mining, agricultural, or engineering company employing 50 or more Chinese laborers would organize a single congrégation specific to the individual company to which all Chinese workers, irrespective of their place of origin, would belong. These special congrégations would be “administered in an entirely autonomous fashion and will enjoy complete independence with respect to the congrégation that exists in the province [in which the company is based].”⁷⁶ No financial requirements limited voting eligibility for members of Tonkin’s corporate congrégations.⁷⁷

What can we extrapolate from the absence of voting restrictions among Tonkin’s coolie community? The existence across Indochina of voting restrictions of varying rigorousness has already been established, as have some of the Chinese and French justifications for the policy of limited suffrage in congrégational elections. The benefits for a policy of restricted suffrage seem fairly clear on both sides of the equation. From the Chinese perspective, the dominant economically based social hierarchy found reinforcement in a system where only community members of some means could participate in the leadership process. As wealthier Chinese members bore the lion’s share of the expense for supporting a congrégation’s programs and institutions, they staked a logical claim to a greater share in the organization’s decision-making processes. Additionally, as the following chapter will discuss in greater detail, wealth as a prerequisite for leadership enjoyed nearly unrivaled prominence as a determinant for status in overseas Chinese communities, not only in

⁷⁶ Projet d’arrêté réglementant les Congrégations Asiatiques au Tonkin, Art. III, pp. 2-3, TTLTQG1, RST 8886.

⁷⁷ Projet d’arrêté réglementant les Congrégations Asiatiques au Tonkin, Art. IV, p. 4, TTLTQG1, RST 8886.

Tonkin, Cambodia, and Cochinchina, but in Singapore, Malaya, and Dutch Indonesia as well.⁷⁸

From the French perspective, Chinese resistance to the ideal of universal suffrage bore some weight, but not as much as the notion of putting people who could be held financially responsible for the misdeeds of the organization at the congregation's helm. The importance of selecting solid, respectable individuals to lead Tonkin's Chinese community was a paramount concern to the French provincial administrators for several practical reasons. Wealthy leaders possessed the resources to reimburse the French government for any expenses incurred as a result of Chinese misconduct, but more importantly, leaders with long histories in the region were viewed as more likely to support the goals of the French regime than to risk the loss of their livelihoods.⁷⁹ Additionally, general experience indicated that those with a vested interest in the system would govern more responsibly than those with nothing to lose; however, in the case of the corporate congregations of Tonkin, these rules did not apply. Why?

To answer this question, we must first take a closer look at the congregations in question. Corporate congregations were composed of members who largely slipped between the cracks of the traditional urban-centered Chinese social structure. These Chinese laborers were nearly always poor and quite frequently illiterate; therefore, it is unlikely that any of them would have qualified to vote under the suffrage laws existing in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Additionally, companies tended to hire people

⁷⁸ The practical and cultural importance of wealth as a precondition for congregational leadership is explored in greater detail in the portion of this dissertation addressing the characteristics preferred in Congregation presidents.

⁷⁹ Circular regarding elections of the Presidents of Chinese congregations, 22 September 1908, TTLTQG1, RST 22.502. Although this circular never makes this point specifically, the emphasis it places upon selecting presidents with deep financial and personal roots in the region implies this point quite clearly.

from an assortment of native places in China so the formulation of a corporate sub-ethnic place identity proved problematic. A typical congrégation was reluctant to vouch for people about whom it knew nothing, fearful that they would have to bear the financial brunt of any malfeasance committed by the person or disappearance of the individual from his workplace. Furthermore, in the case of engineering companies, such as those constructing the railway lines across northern Tonkin and into China, the workplace was highly mobile and could shift from province to province in a very short period of time. This doubtless exacerbated the reluctance of a standard congrégation to accept responsibility for these coolies. On the other hand, the French administrators were quite displeased by the lack of a traditional structure of social regulation within these laborer communities. To solve these problems without forcing other more orthodox Chinese congrégations to accept new members at random,⁸⁰ the French elected to create a special system that would provide these corporate communities with a strict structure of social governance without interfering with the basic scheme they had established and extrapolated to apply to all of the other regions of Indochina.

Despite the different structure developed to address the issue of mobile Chinese labor in the north, the new conventions were not always followed. In 1915, four Chinese Presidents were appointed by the Commander of Tonkin's Second Military Territory, Major Marquet, to oversee the Chinese coolie population in the mining conglomerations of Pia-Ouac.⁸¹ The Major forwarded the order of appointment to the French Resident-Superior in Hanoi from the territorial headquarters at Cao Bang with an explanation of the difficulty involved in holding elections for Chinese coolies. He fully acknowledged his intent to violate colonial

⁸⁰ Such an act would have violated French law guaranteeing congrégations the ultimate right to approve or refuse membership based on their own individual criteria.

⁸¹ Letter from the commandant of Tonkin's second Military Territory to the Resident Superior in Hanoi, 26 October 1915, TTLTQG1, RST 8667.

procedure, writing, “Elections did not proceed in accordance with Article 12 of the Order of December 12, 1913, because [doing so] is nearly impossible.”⁸² The population in Pia-Ouac’s mines was composed primarily of wandering laborers who came to Tonkin from Guangdong, Guangxi, and Yunnan and drifted out again when they decided to move on or return to China. With such irregular sojourns in Tonkin, no one knew these coolies and therefore no one could be found to vouch for their respectability or character. For the Territorial Commander, responsible for all events in his region, this shifting population engendered skepticism and concern. “An election undertaken with people like this would be utterly meaningless,” he wrote.⁸³ Instead, he suggested that the mine supervisors invest their own Chinese managers with the congregational authority to match their professional authority over the coolies with whom they worked.⁸⁴ As the following photograph indicates, mining areas in Tonkin were often in remote, rugged locations, developed only in terms of mining infrastructure and industry, and generally far from the beaten path.

Although we do not know what the Resident Superior’s ultimate decision was, archival sources give us a clear idea of his natural inclination. When Hanoi’s Chief Administrator forwarded the Pia-Ouac decision to the Resident-Superior,⁸⁵ the Resident responded with disapproval, suggesting that designating congregation presidents in this manner was a useless exercise and that the position of a congregational president in these labor intensive environments was often filled by a

⁸² Letter from the commandant of Tonkin’s second Military Territory to the Resident Superior in Hanoi, 26 October 1915, TTLTQG1, RST 8667.

⁸³ Letter from the commandant of Tonkin’s second Military Territory to the Resident Superior in Hanoi, 26 October 1915, TTLTQG1, RST 8667.

⁸⁴ Letter from the commandant of Tonkin’s second Military Territory to the Resident Superior in Hanoi, 26 October 1915, TTLTQG1, RST 8667.

⁸⁵ Letter from the Chief Administrator of the First Bureau in Hanoi to the Resident Superior in Hanoi, 4 November 1915, TTLTQG1, RST 8667.

Chinese chief of operations for the company anyway.⁸⁶ In other words, the Resident saw little use in violating colonial law by disenfranchising the Chinese laborers if elections would also result in the corporate congregations choosing presidential candidates that were acceptable to the French.



Figure 6 Mining⁸⁷

Candidacy and the Electoral Process

Apart from the issue of suffrage, strict rules governed both an individual's eligibility for candidacy, and also the actual mechanics of the voting process. As with suffrage, laws governing eligibility for candidacy instituted much stricter criteria in Cochinchina, Cambodia, and Tonkin than they did in Annam and Laos. The standard justification for this inequity appears to be that the dearth of Chinese in Laos and Annam prevented them from enacting such stringent financial requirements. After all, the absence of any eligible candidates would surely throw a kink into the electoral

⁸⁶ Letter from the Chief Administrator of the First Bureau in Hanoi to the Resident Superior in Hanoi, 26 October 1915, TTLTQG1, RST 8667. Refer to the handwritten note on the page. (See Arrêté 12 December 1913, Art. 12, 34 & following for clarification)

⁸⁷ <http://www.nguyenphuococ.com/hinhxua/hinhxua.htm>, Feb 12, 2006.

process. Despite these differences, a number of the minimum requirements for eligibility remained the same in all five regions.⁸⁸

As established by the French administration, the eligibility requirements for candidacy for the office of congrégation president read much like the requirements for any contemporary political office. To start with, a prospective president was at least 30 years of age. Although there was no requirement dictating a minimum duration for a candidate's membership in the congrégation in which he sought the presidency, a candidate was required to have resided in the territory in which the congrégation was located for at least two years. Additionally, eligibility depended upon satisfaction of a morality clause; any criminal convictions, or any civil convictions in which a penalty was administered by a judge, permanently excluded an individual from holding a congregational office.⁸⁹ According to Nguyễn, commercial law excluded a Chinese resident from candidacy for one further offense:

Since the individuals who have been declared bankrupt by the courts are not eligible to hold offices, it would seem, though there are no specific statements to that effect in the law, that, by extension of this general rule, Chinese shopkeepers who have been declared bankrupt are not eligible for the office of the president of the congrégation.⁹⁰

Although these rules appear to reflect a colonial legislative bias, echoes of common Chinese patterns of leadership selection can be seen in this French-endorsed system. Yen Ch'ing-hwang suggests that the Chinese model highlights three basic characteristics that determine an individual's eligibility to lead a clan: "seniority in generation and age, social standing, and integrity."⁹¹

⁸⁸ These are the requirements as outlined in the law of 1935 concerning the congrégations.

⁸⁹ Nguyen Quoc Dinh, *The Chinese Congregations*, 101.

⁹⁰ Nguyen Quoc Dinh, *The Chinese Congregations*, 101.

⁹¹ Ching-hwang Yen, *Community and Politics: The Chinese in Colonial Singapore and Malaya*, (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1995), 41.

Fulfillment of these basic requirements did not necessarily mean automatic approval if a candidate succeeded in winning election to his office of choice. Once again, colonial law prescribed different procedures for the different regions of Indochina. Laws governing the Chinese congregations provided for straightforward elections in Tonkin, Annam, and Laos. In those three territories, eligible members of the congregations voted for the candidate of the choice. The winner's name was then submitted for approval to the Résident-Supérieur responsible for the region and the election was complete.

A very different procedure determined the outcome of presidential and vice-presidential elections in Cochinchina and Cambodia. In those territories, members of the congregation met for an election in which the top three candidates were selected for submission to French authorities. Upon receipt of the candidates' names, Cambodia's Resident Superior and the Governor in Cochinchina then selected the new officers for their respective regions from the list provided them.⁹² Clearly, this undermined the democratic value of elections in those regions by granting the final choice to the French authorities.

Resignations and Dismissals from Office

Although the post of congregational president was ostensibly for a set term of four years, in practice, popular and respected leaders could continue in their posts until ill health or death forced the issue of their retirement. Cases of voluntary repatriation to China because of sickness were quite common across Cochinchina and Tonkin. To give just one example, Phoun-Lou-Mou, the president of the Fujian congregation in Sontay, retired back to China in 1891 due to grave personal illness.⁹³ Not all retirees

⁹² Nguyen Quoc Dinh, *The Chinese Congregations*, 106.

⁹³ Letter from the French resident in Sontay to the Resident Superior in Hanoi, 20 January 1891, TTLTQG1, RST 29035.

returned to China after stepping down from their leadership positions, but illness remained an ever-present danger in the Indochinese sojourn. In addition to personal illness, presidents often resigned their posts and returned to China to attend to an ailing parent, or to arrange the funeral of a recently deceased parent. This was the case with Lam Khai Bui, the president of the Hainan congregation in Ha-Tien who retired to return to Hainan Island and arrange a proper funeral for his mother.⁹⁴ Filial duty was not an automatic exemption from congregational responsibilities. Before his departure back to Hainan, Lam was required to verify that none of his congregation's payments or taxes was in arrears.⁹⁵

At times, the election records themselves allow brief insight into the devastating hardship of life in Indochina. In the case of Tanan's Trieu Chau congregation, 1895 proved to be a particularly ill-starred year for the congregation's leadership. In January 1895, the Trieu Chau president, a 54-year old man named Trinh Ngoc, asked permission to retire from his post, saying that his state of health prevented him from fulfilling his duties. Trinh Ngoc's resignation having been duly approved, the congregation elected a new leader, the 48 year old Trang Tich.⁹⁶ Ratification of Tanan's Trieu Chau elections came through from Saigon on January 15, 1895.⁹⁷ By January 17, a mere two days later, the congregation had to reconvene for a third presidential election. Trang Tich, it seemed, had died. In his place, the congregation elected 56-year-old Lâm Văn.⁹⁸ The records of this particular series of

⁹⁴ Letter from Lam Khai Bui to the administrator of Ha-Tien, 7 August 1896, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.14/021(2).

⁹⁵ Letter from Lam Khai Bui to the administrator of Ha-Tien, 7 August 1896, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.14/021(2).

⁹⁶ Letter from Tanan Administrator Bertin to Lt GouCoch in Saigon, 9 January 1895, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA. 12/148(28).

⁹⁷ Order No. 11 from Lt.GouCoch, 15 January 1895, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA. 12/148(28).

⁹⁸ Recount of voting procedures from B. de Taillac to Administrator of Tanan, 17 January 1895, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA. 12/148(28).

elections are interesting on a number of fronts, giving particular insight into three aspects of congregational life.

From the human perspective, the unexpected obstacles to this particular electoral process reveal the tenuousness of immigrant life in rural Southeast Asia. In a period of just a few weeks, one man retired from his prominent position with broken health, another man died before he could even take office, and not until the third attempt was an electee healthy enough to survive in the leadership role. Similarly, the registers of the many votes taken to assign a Trieu Chau president give us a window into certain general leadership characteristics within Tanan's Chinese community. For example, looking at the voting registers reveals that every Chinese member of the congregation who ran for the presidential office was also eligible to vote. The basis for this conclusion lies in careful observation of the details. The complete list of eligible electors is included in the election file,⁹⁹ and every candidate for congregation president appears on the elector list. Additionally, these records suggest that older candidates performed more successfully in the elections than did candidates in their twenties, thirties, or even early forties.¹⁰⁰

Also, electors themselves tended to be older. In the case of this Trieu Chau congregation, 11 of the 18 eligible voters were over 37 years of age, effectively well into middle age. The issue of age takes on more significance when factors of environment and life expectancy are figured into the equation. As in the case of the hapless Trang Tich, who, at a mere 48 years of age, passed away before he could assume his office, old age came quickly, and Cochinchina's tropical climate

⁹⁹ List of electors for Trieu Chau presidential election in Tanan, 17 January 1895, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA. 12/148(28).

¹⁰⁰ Report of election results, January 18, 1896, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA. 12/148(28). Older candidates refers to men in their late forties and early to mid-fifties, who appear to have outperformed men in their twenties or thirties once the votes were tallied.

contributed to the ill-health of many of the region's residents. Cholera and malaria cut devastating swaths through the Mekong Delta region at regular intervals, and overwork combined with the vices of a bachelor lifestyle to cheat many overseas Chinese out of old age. The very nature of financial success contributed to the age of congregation leaders as well. Establishing a successful business or company took valuable time, and unless one was fortunate enough to be the scion of a successful house, success often arrived alongside middle age. The link between age and fiduciary stability further cemented the importance of age and experience as leadership characteristics for members of the Chinese community.

Other than personal or familial health, finances and geography also played paramount roles in an individual's suitability for the presidential post. In the instance of Lam Khoan, briefly the president of Gia Định's Cantonese congregation, he resigned his post within two weeks of being elected to the position because his finances were insufficient to shoulder the very real economic burden imposed upon a congregation president. To make matters worse, Lam Khoan lived in village quite distant from the congregation's headquarters and had trouble spending as much time there as he felt he ought.¹⁰¹ In situations like these, compassionate dismissal came quickly. Within two weeks, Gia Định's administrator, Marquis, had forwarded the letter to the Lieutenant Governor¹⁰² and Lam Khoan had received a formal order of dismissal.¹⁰³ Appointing a man both personally unwilling and financially unable to fulfill the duties of his office met no one's needs in Indochina's colonial milieu.

¹⁰¹ Letter from Lam Khoan to the Administrator of Gia Định, 2 November 1892, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.13/271(16).

¹⁰² Letter from Administrator of Gia Định to Lt-Governor of Cochinchine, 8 November 1893, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.13/271(16).

¹⁰³ Order issued by Lt-Governor of Cochinchine, 16 November 1893, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.13/271(16).

Contested Elections

Despite the careful orchestration of the electoral process, new Congrégational presidents did not always assume their offices without contestation. Oftentimes, members of a specific Chinese community were reluctant to accept a recently elected president. At other times, the French objected to the Chinese leadership choice. In either case, a contended election spawned bitter, and occasionally even highly personal, complaints and accusations about the character or leadership ability of the president-elect.

Life within specific Chinese communities was occasionally beset by turmoil. Deep-seated rivalries frequently endured for years and communities divided into factions when popular candidates fought for dominance within the congrégation. In the case of Soc Trang's Phuoc Kien community, these factions were particularly enduring and centered around two internal groups: the clique of Huynh Cánh and the clique of Huynh Thuy, who was also called Â-Suôi. These two men were both prominent storekeepers with very honorable reputations: they both held 4th-class patents and were registered in the 2nd category on the tax rolls, meaning that although they were not the wealthiest of Chinese merchants in the Delta region, they were certainly well-to-do. Ironically, these feuding congregants were also close relatives, although the exact degree of their relationship is never made explicit.¹⁰⁴ At some unknown point in the past, the two had fallen out with another and the resultant feud not only split the loyalties of the congrégation, but also instigated a pattern of intrigue and mud slinging that further inflamed the enmity of the two cliques. Marcellot, the

¹⁰⁴ Letter from the Administrator of Soc Trang to the Lt. GouCoch in Saigon, 6 December 1895, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.15/157(3). The Administrator's letter refers to the two men, literally, as close relatives ("*sont proches parents*"). One can assume that if they were actually brothers, the Administrator would have said so explicitly, suggesting that Huynh Cánh and Huynh Thuy were probably cousins. The expression could be interpreted figuratively, but I believe that they were actually blood relatives because they shared a common surname.

Administrator of Soc Trang, reported that this pattern of competition and hostility had repeated itself for three consecutive years. In 1894, Huynh Thuy lost the election; Huynh Canh lost in 1895.¹⁰⁵ The cycle appeared endless.

In fact, the two cliques clashed with such regularity that leaders of the Phuoc Kien congregation, assuming that discord and electoral disputes were inevitable, moved to ensure the integrity of the election well in advance of the actual vote. To that end, they requested that the Administrator install an electoral office in the Khanh Hung communal house prior to the election and to appoint a committee to preside over the electoral office. The committee of six was chosen from among the oldest and youngest members of the electorate. The establishment of neutral ground in the form of the communal house held particular significance for this congrégation, as they actually possessed no pagoda. Additionally, the congregation agreed in advance to have only two candidates and one formal vote, in which a simple majority would determine the victor.¹⁰⁶ On October 26, 1895, the election took place and Huynh Thuy won the presidency.¹⁰⁷

By November 5, 1895, the Huynh Cang clique had hired André Cremazy, a French lawyer practicing in Saigon, to pursue the matter with the Lieutenant Governor. This letter was submitted under the auspices of 22 merchants residing in the city of Soc Trang and another 15 merchants living in Hoa Mý, a village in the Bâx Xay district of Soc Trang, all of whom were apparently members of Soc Trang's Phuoc Kien congrégation, and proffered several justifications for invalidating the

¹⁰⁵ Letter from the Administrator of Soc Trang to the Lt. GouCoch in Saigon, 6 December 1895, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.15/157(3).

¹⁰⁶ Letter from the Administrator of Soc Trang to the Lt. GouCoch in Saigon, 6 December 1895, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.15/157(3). As per French law, the election also had to be ratified by the Lieutenant Governor of Cochinchina.

¹⁰⁷ Letter from Andre Cremazy to the Lt-GouCoch, 5 November 1895, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.15/157(3).

election results. First, claimed the losing side, Huynh Cang was the wealthy proprietor of his own distillery, while Huynh Thuy merely labored in someone else's distillery and owned nothing himself. The distribution of votes reinforced Huynh Cang's claims to financial superiority: according to the plaintiffs, Huynh Cang's 113 votes came from Soc Trang's respected merchants, whereas Huynh Thuy's 130 votes were the voices "of coolies, [and] of rowers aboard the Chinese junks sailing from Soc Trang to Cholon: that is to say, people with no fixed address, scarcely any means of existence."¹⁰⁸ According to the Cremazy, the nature of Huynh Thuy's constituency violated Article 25 of the order of February 19, 1890, which stated that in order to vote, a Chinese man must have a verifiable place of residence. After all, argued Cremazy, "it is impossible that the exhibitors and all of their companions, every merchant, most of whom are wealthy and the rest [financially] comfortable, upon whom exclusively rest all of the responsibilities of the congregation and upon the doors of whom one always knocks when heavy fines are imposed upon the congregation, are left at the mercy of people without steady work and whose situations cannot offer any security."¹⁰⁹ In addition, the Huynh Cang clique pointed out that only two candidates' names were submitted to the Lieutenant Governor for approval, which also directly contravened Article 25 of the order of February 19, 1890. Essentially, they argued that the presentation of only two names failed to give the Lieutenant Governor an adequate choice of candidates for the position.¹¹⁰

These arguments accurately reveal the biases of both parties involved in the dispute. Wealth, or the lack thereof, is an ever-present issue in colonial documents

¹⁰⁸ Letter from Andre Cremazy to the Lt-GouCoch, 5 November 1895, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.15/157(3).

¹⁰⁹ Letter from Andre Cremazy to the Lt-GouCoch, 5 November 1895, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.15/157(3).

¹¹⁰ Letter from Andre Cremazy to the Lt-GouCoch, 5 November 1895, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.15/157(3).

written by either the Chinese or the French, permanently cementing its place as the premier qualification for leadership. Colonial biases merely required a financial scapegoat in case of expensive wrongdoing on the part of congregation members; Chinese motivations were a bit more complex. Unlike in China, where scholar-officials stood at the top of the social hierarchy until the 20th century, wealthy merchants and entrepreneurs formed the core of the social aristocracy. Typically, truly talented intellectuals stayed in China where their skills were more valued.¹¹¹ In the Nanyang network of businessmen and high finance, money and extravagance became the best measure of a man's success. In his study of Singapore and Malaya, Yen Ch'ing-hwang observes that "wealth was the main determinant of social mobility; those who possessed it moved up to the apex of the class hierarchy, and those who lost it descended even down to the bottom."¹¹² By deriding Huynh Thuy's economic status, Huynh Cang utilized the most lethal attack possible on his opponent's fitness for rule.

In the end, it seems that Huynh Cang's efforts to replace Huynh Thuy as congregation president failed. The long and public skirmishes between the two men permanently soured any hope of either being able to lodge an effective protest against the election. The fact that the congregation itself tried to circumvent the problem by approaching the French in advance to warn them about the looming electoral disaster only highlighted the unreliability of the protest. Administrator Marcellot

¹¹¹ Yen, *Community and Politics*, 204. Yen argues that only second-rate intellectuals traveled to Southeast Asia, resulting a dearth of people able or willing to ensure the proper maintenance of Chinese social and cultural patterns in colonial territories. The merchants were too busy to see to this issue and the intellectuals were too unskilled and were handicapped by their low prestige.

¹¹² Yen, *Community and Politics*, 5.

recommended that the election results stand,¹¹³ and no evidence exists to suggest that the Lieutenant Governor chose to countermand the local recommendation.

Chinese elections in Soc Trang had been fractious and turbulent well before the Huynh clan arrived upon the political scene. In the Cantonese presidential election in the autumn of 1893, the local administrator dismissed a congregational president, forcing his replacement by convening a new election. In August 1893, Lý Hợc, the president of Soc Trang's Cantonese congregation, organized a special meeting of all of the members of the congregation in an attempt to identify the guilty party in a recently committed theft. Soc Trang's Administrator Bertin took umbrage at Lý Hợc's presumption and sent a formal complaint off to Chief Administrator Nicolai inquiring into the legality of such a meeting in a Chinese congregation.¹¹⁴ The sticking point, as Bertin saw it, was that the meeting had been convened with the intent of identifying the perpetrator of a crime. In Bertin's opinion, the criminal nature of the inquiry usurped the authority of the local administration, which had already initiated a judicial inquest into the offense. Nicolai replied that Lý Hợc absolutely had not exceeded his authority by gathering his congregation together to discuss the matter, but this reply failed to satisfy Bertin, who took his complaint one step higher to Cochinchina's Lieutenant Governor.¹¹⁵ He complained, "I do not have to bring up again the death threats uttered on this occasion against two Chinese of the congregation because the one theft was referred to justice, and the other, who was arrested on suspicion of

¹¹³ Letter from the Administrator of Soc Trang to the Lt. GouCoch in Saigon, 6 December 1895, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.15/157(3).

¹¹⁴ Letter from Soc Trang's Administrator Bertin to the Lt. GouCoch, Saigon, 12 September 1893, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.15/157(5).

¹¹⁵ Letter from Soc Trang's Administrator Bertin to the Lt. GouCoch, Saigon, 12 September 1893, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.15/157(5).

burglary. I had believed and I believe still that a congregation president who tolerates people who give rise to such meetings could not stay in office.”¹¹⁶

Despite the opinion offered by Nicolai, Bertin took it upon himself to suspend Lý Học from the office of president and, pending an official decision from his colonial superiors, he invited the congregation’s notables to appoint an interim leader to take Lý Học’s place. The congregation chose Diệp Hỷ as Lý Học’s replacement, but Lý Học had no intention of submitting graciously to this apparent injustice. Despite Diệp Hỷ’s official designation as the interim leader, Lý Học refused to relinquish the register and official papers of the congregation to him. Bertin appears to have been enraged by Lý Học’s recalcitrance, writing, “In the face of the bad will of this man who has quite a bad reputation, I did not believe I had to bow.”¹¹⁷ He gathered about 95 of the congregation’s notables together for a second time, permanently ousting Lý Học from his leadership position. During the election, 15 or 20 of Lý Học’s staunch supporters refused to take part in the voting but the abstention of these partisans did not invalidate the election results. In the end, whether justly or unjustly, Lý Học lost the leadership position he had held within his congregation.¹¹⁸

What issues underlay Lý Học’s dismissal from office? Although it is impossible to recreate with certainty the events in Soc Trang’s Cantonese congregation in 1893, this story does provide insight into general patterns of power and control in Cochinchina. It seems apparent from the vitriol of Bertin’s writing that bad blood existed between the two men. Both Lý Học and Bertin occupied positions in a colonial aristocracy. Bertin’s authority derived from French power and his

¹¹⁶ Letter from Soc Trang’s Administrator Bertin to the Lt. GouCoch, Saigon, 12 September 1893, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.15/157(5).

¹¹⁷ Letter from Soc Trang’s Administrator Bertin to the Lt. GouCoch, Saigon, 12 September 1893, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.15/157(5).

¹¹⁸ Letter from Soc Trang’s Administrator Bertin to the Lt. GouCoch, Saigon, 12 September 1893, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.15/157(5).

position with the bureaucratic hierarchy of the colonial apparatus. Lý Học, on the other hand, held authority as the chosen representative of his people in matters of citizenship and commerce, both with the indigenous population and with the French, by virtue of his status as Congregation president. Despite Lý Học's local influence and the frequently laissez-faire approach taken by the French with regard to the internal processes of governance within the overseas Chinese communities, absolute colonial authority was the fundamental reality of congregational leadership in Indochina.

When a Chinese leader found himself in opposition to a French Administrator, the result was a foregone conclusion. The French conceived of the Chinese "right to rule" in very broad strokes, a situation which allowed them to find cause to remove Chinese residents from office or even to expel them from the colony if desired. In other words, the nebulous definition of fitness (or *unfitness*) to rule meant that an offending Chinese leader had little hope of escaping French retribution. In the case of Lý Học, Bertin sealed the president's fate with three basic accusations. He accused Lý Học of allowing criminals and swindlers to operate freely within the Cantonese congregation, he insinuated that Lý Học was a compulsive gambler who had long since lost the respect of his congregation, and, most devastatingly, he saddled him with the unforgivable peccadillo of incompetent bookkeeping.¹¹⁹ By aiming for the colonial pocketbook, this accusation proved the most damaging indictment of Lý Học's fitness for the presidency. From the perspective of the Lieutenant Governor's office, the veracity of these accusations was more or less irrelevant. In a congregation with more than 100 active members, someone could always be found to replace a disgraced leader, and when the conflict reached the office of the Lieutenant Governor

¹¹⁹ Letter from Soc Trang's Administrator Bertin to the Lt. GouCoch, Saigon, 12 September 1893, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.15/157(5). In his letter, Bertin declares that the reason Lý Học proved so unwilling to turn over the congregational registers to the interim leader, Diệp Hỷ, was because he had not been keeping congregational accounts in the first place.

in Saigon, the locally based French bureaucrat enjoyed an insurmountable advantage in terms of getting his way.

1893 was a difficult year for Soc Trang's Trieu Chau congregation as well. Sex, scandal, and crime marred the Trieu Chau elections, resulting in the mass interrogation of the majority of the Trieu Chau notables in an attempt to ferret out the truth from a quagmire of protests, insults, and lies. On November 29, 1893, the Secretary General in Saigon received a petition from 71 members of Soc Trang's Trieu Congrégation protesting the election of Lý Hiệp Nguón as congregation president. According to the plaintiffs, they had not received fair notice of the election and, in any event, they were extremely dissatisfied with the choice of Lý Hiệp Nguón because he was "ignorant, illiterate, a gambler, and he was once condemned in front of the congrégation, accused by his son-in-law of having sexual relations with his [Lý Hiệp Nguón's] daughter."¹²⁰ The petitioners had already approached Bertin, Soc Trang's administrator, with their grievances, but were told that the election was finished and had already been ratified and sent to Saigon; therefore, Bertin refused to acknowledge or act upon their request.¹²¹

Not surprisingly, the Lieutenant Governor inquired into the matter, and in the ensuing investigation, a number of interrogations occurred. The first issue to be addressed concerned whether or not the community had been properly notified of the election. Trần Minh Hương, the former chief of the congregation, was personally responsible for arranging the election of his successor. According to Trần's personal testimony, he issued the election notice on November 11, 1893, three days prior to the actual election. He posted notices in Bồ Thảo and Vũng Thơm, both areas with highly

¹²⁰ Petition sent to the Secretary general by 71 Chinese of Soc Trang's Trieu Chau congregation, 29 November 1893, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.15/157(5).

¹²¹ Petition sent to the Secretary general by 71 Chinese of Soc Trang's Trieu Chau congregation, 29 November 1893, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.15/157(5).

concentrated Chinese populations, announcing that the election was to be held in the congregation's communal house at 7:00 am on November 14, 1893. Furthermore, he hired a *tamtam*¹²² to continually beat out the message of the election up until the morning it occurred.¹²³ Trần insisted that 238 voters came to the election and that all of them voted for Lý Hiệp Nguồn; he maintained that the election was quite proper and any protest was baseless.¹²⁴ The Cochinchinese administration did not take Trần at his word.

The French government in Saigon forwarded the Chinese complaints back to Soc Trang, apparently with instructions for Administrator Bertin to look into the problem. In mid December, Bertin attempted to gather together all of the Chinese plaintiffs to address their issues publicly and investigate the reasons underlying their complaints. Although attendance at the assembly seems to have been mandatory, less than half of the plaintiffs appeared at the meeting. Despite the poor showing, the Administrator decided that the attending Chinese represented a sufficient quorum for probing into the dispute and the records of the ensuing interrogation shed some light on Sino-French interaction and values.¹²⁵

The ease with which the Chinese plaintiffs went over the head of the Administrator to seek redress from Saigon must have galled Soc Trang's

¹²² A *tamtam* is a type of drum messenger who wanders the streets of the town or village beating out, or perhaps calling out, the message he has been hired to convey.

¹²³ Letter from Trần Minh Hương to the Administrator of Soc Trang 18 December 1893, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.15/157(5).

¹²⁴ Letter from Trần Minh Hương to the Administrator of Soc Trang, 18 December 1893, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.15/157(5). The number of voters who chose Lý Hiệp Nguồn appears to be up for debate. A petition sent by the Chinese of the congregation concerning another incident connected with this particular election placed Lý Hiệp Nguồn's support at 229 votes (Petition sent by 42 members of the Trieu Chau congregation to the Administrator of Soc Trang, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.15/157(5)).

¹²⁵ Letter from the Administrator of Soc Trang to the General Secretary in Saigon, 30 December 1893, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.15/157(5).

Administrator, and his impatience with what he perceived as “childishness” on the part of the Chinese is clearly evident. In his inquiry, Bertin asked, and received answers to, three basic questions:

1: Were you summoned in due course to take part in the election?

All responded, yes, posters were hung by the former president of the congregation in due course. We each informed one another.

Some [of them] blame the former president for not coming to their residences to summon them himself. (This is childishness that does not deserve a response.)

2: Did you come to vote?

Many answered no; some said that they came but that in the face of the newly adopted voting method, [they] refused to vote . . . What they call the new method is the measure that I have engaged for depositing the ballots in the ballot box for Inspection, and for counting the votes as one proceeds under the authority of French electoral laws.

Once again, these are not very serious considerations.

3: Then why do you protest against this election?

We do not protest the election itself, neither against the method of proceeding, even though it is new. But we ask the administration to redo this election because Lý Hiệp Nguôn does not please us for the reasons we explained in our petition to the Secretary General.¹²⁶

In relaying these comments to the Secretary General, Bertin exasperatedly insists that all of this electoral conflict would have been avoided had the plaintiffs actually voted in the election that they all admitted to having been warned of well in advance of its occurrence. The letter to the secretary General ends with a pointed question: “On which legal flaw could we base a decision to cancel the controversial election?”¹²⁷

¹²⁶ Letter from the Administrator of Soc Trang to the General Secretary in Saigon, 30 December 1893, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.15/157(5).

¹²⁷ Letter from the Administrator of Soc Trang to the General Secretary in Saigon, 30 December 1893, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.15/157(5).

In his letter, Bertin comments that Soc Trang elections almost always resulted in protests based not on legitimate complaints concerning the nature or process of the disputed election, but on the fact that the plaintiffs personally disliked the choice of candidates.¹²⁸ In fairness to the Administrator, the two disputed elections administered during his tenure that have been discussed above do seem to fit the bill of personal, rather than procedural, disputes. Even the disastrous conflict between the two Phuoc Kien cliques of Huynh Cang and Huynh Thuy centered largely around scarcely concealed personal loyalties and dissatisfactions. In the Phuoc Kien instance, the engagement of a French attorney ensured that the election was disputed on procedural grounds, but the underlying factor was clearly an enduring personal enmity between the two candidates and their partisans. It is not difficult to imagine that the Phuoc Kien dispute would have suffered from the same non-procedural flaws had the offended party sought redress personally, instead of through the colonial legal apparatus. In either case, legal jargon proved unable to overcome the colonial records of years of public competition between the two cliques. Likewise, the Saigon government generally proved immune to Chinese attempts to subvert the colonially imposed legal structure in order to meet individual needs.

In a three-year period, the three great congregations of Soc Trang all endured electoral conflict of one sort or another. While the concentrated scandal of 1893 to 1895 was most likely exceptionally fractious, it is not hard to imagine the conflict and disputes that regularly tarnished Chinese elections across Cochinchina. Simply dismissing these conflicts as products of a disagreeable colonial administration seems inadequate, because this three-year period in Soc Trang covered the tenures of two different French Administrators. Additionally, these documents indicate that electoral

¹²⁸ Letter from the Administrator of Soc Trang to the General Secretary in Saigon, 30 December 1893, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.15/157(5).

protests within the Chinese community tended to meet with unfavorable results. In the only instance in which an elected president was removed from office, the protest came as a result of his dismissal, rather than being the cause of it. It seems reasonable to suggest that strict regulations governing the organization of congregations contributed to the level of electoral unrest. After all, under the French system, districts like Soc Trang only warranted one congregation per language group. Conflicts within language groups but between native place groups must have been quite common – quarrels that might have been avoided had there been no cap on the number of Chinese congregations allowed in any given area.

All of these conflicts and disputes serve to highlight the importance placed upon leadership selection by each congregation's constituency. Just as in modern times, a certain percentage of voters took elections very seriously indeed and were not above mud slinging or slander to try to tarnish the image of their opponents and thereby achieve victory. The power entrusted to a congregation president was great, but the level of responsibility could not obscure the fact that congregation leaders, as well as a congregation's most notable members, were fallible men. The next two chapters will examine presidential authority and the specific cases of two prominent congregation members, one a president and one who was appointed to Cholon's municipal government, in order to gain a better understanding both of the limits to the power bestowed by prominence within each Chinese community, and the limits of French patience outside of those same communities.

CHAPTER 3: CONGREGATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND THE POWER OF THE *CHEF*

This chapter examines leadership in Indochina's Chinese congregations, paying special attention to the role of the congregation president and the criteria by which he was chosen for office. In the process, it seeks a clearer understanding of the breadth of a president's powers, both within the Chinese community and within Indochinese society at large. Along with the evaluation of the president's authority, this chapter seeks to define the responsibilities of the president, including any penalties or administrative discipline to which the president might be subjected as a result of his failure to adequately or satisfactorily perform the duties required of him by the French administration. To this end, a portrait of Ignace Bou, the leader of Ha Tien's Hainam congregation, will provide an example of precisely who these men were and how they both attained and maintained their power within the congregation.

The Fundamental Precondition for Chinese Leadership

Extensive scholarship addresses native place organizations and their hierarchies and leadership in Mainland China. Some historians have also examined these institutions in Southeast Asia, most notably in Singapore, Malaya, and Indonesia, and a third useful avenue for contextualizing issues of leadership in Chinese communities can be found in the many studies of local elites in mainland China during the 19th and 20th centuries. A comprehensive survey of all of this literature would be a fitting topic for a separate book, but here, I shall only attempt to highlight the points most conceptually relevant to the subjects of this study: the Chinese congregations of Indochina.

Historiography on the subject of leadership, whether based in China or in Southeast Asia, can be best imagined as approaching the question from one of two perspectives: either by studying the activities and careers of local gentry and elites, or

by pursuing a more institutional approach. In their edited volume Chinese Local Elites and Patterns of Dominance, historians Joseph Esherick and Mary Rankin choose the first approach, seeking to define the nature and power of local gentry in China by studying numerous individual local elite families and their responses both to the Chinese Imperial State and to peasant society.¹²⁹ Esherick and Rankin readily accede to the inevitability of hierarchy in state-society relations; however, they ascribe the prevailing scholarly assumptions about Chinese elite and the attributes that characterize them to European prejudice, namely Max Weber's assumption that merit superseded wealth as a prerequisite for elite rule in China.¹³⁰ In fact, Esherick and Rankin point out that tension and competition between local elites on the one hand and the state, as represented by imperial officials, on the other signifies "a 'dynamic oscillation' between integration into the imperial system and autonomy from it."¹³¹

Scholarship supports such a wide variety of interpretations of the issue that clarifying local elite status is a daunting task. In his work on Chinese rebellions, historian Philip Kuhn discusses the militarization of local elites, a phenomenon he argues increased gentry power vis-à-vis the state and left local elites supreme in the face of the power vacuum created after the 1911 revolution.¹³² Similarly, in her work on Taiwan's Lin family, Joanna Meskill emphasizes the endurance of a local gentry family as a result of their willingness to enforce control over their local population and over local watering rights.¹³³ Historian Hilary Beattie's study of Anhui province also

¹²⁹ Joseph Esherick and Mary Rankin, eds. *Chinese Local Elites and Patterns of Dominance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

¹³⁰ Esherick and Rankin, *Chinese Local Elites*, 1.

¹³¹ Esherick and Rankin, *Chinese Local Elites*, 5-7. The term "dynamic oscillation" is borrowed from Frederic Wakeman.

¹³² Philip Kuhn, *Rebellion and Its Enemies in Late Imperial China: Militarization and Social Structure, 1769-1864* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980).

¹³³ Joanna Meskill, *A Chinese Pioneer Family: The Lins of Wu-feng, Taiwan, 1729-1895* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979).

emphasizes the endurance of elite status over generations, although she attributes this longevity more to land acquisition, investment in family education, and careful stewardship of acquired assets than to any martial prowess.¹³⁴ These depictions of local gentry as a relatively static category do not go uncontested. Historian Ho Ping-ti describes a very different phenomenon in his book, The Ladder of Success in Imperial China. Using the framework outlined by Chang Chung-li as his foundation,¹³⁵ Ho emphasizes the probable existence of a great degree of social mobility into the Chinese elite. To Ho, this social mobility and ability to rise to the status of local elite diminished concerns over the inequality of China's rigid social hierarchy, thus allowing it to continue.

For the purposes of my evaluation of an overseas Chinese community, however, historian Keith Schoppa offers the most useful explanation of local elite status in his study of China's Zhejiang Province. In this study, Schoppa emphasizes the varying and specialized nature of Chinese elites, suggesting that different types of elite emerged to meet the requirements of different areas of Zhejiang, a variation resulting in the existence of a highly commercialized and politicized elite in the thriving, populated areas of the province.¹³⁶ Rankin adds to Schoppa's conclusions in her study of Zhejiang elite,¹³⁷ revealing "the elite's readiness to adopt new associational forms – chambers of commerce, educational associations, and a host of other professional associations and special interest organizations – following the

¹³⁴ Hilary Beattie, "The Alternative to Resistance: The Case of T'ung-ch'eng, Anhui," in *From Ming to Ch'ing: Conquest, Region and Continuity in 17th century China*, ed. Jonathan Spence & John Wills, Jr. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979).

¹³⁵ Chung-li Chang, *The Chinese Gentry: Studies on Their Role in 19th Century Chinese Society* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1955).

¹³⁶ Keith R. Schoppa, *Chinese Elites and Political Change: Zhejiang Province in the Early 20th Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).

¹³⁷ Mary Backus Rankin, *Elite Activism and Political Transformation in China, Zhejiang Province, 1865-1911* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1986).

removal of long-standing Qing prohibitions during the first decade of the twentieth century.”¹³⁸

Thus, we see an emerging portrait of local elites in China: a community enjoying a considerable degree of social mobility and accepting of new entrants into the privileged class; a community possessed of great flexibility in terms of the establishment of and membership in new forms of social and professional organizations; and a community in which membership criteria differed according to the characteristics of the groups’ local political, social, and economic environments. What, then, does this complex picture of elites contribute to our understanding of overseas Chinese leadership in the South Seas?

Although very few – if any – secondary sources speak directly to issues of leadership in Indochina’s Chinese congregations, an institutional approach to the study of leadership criteria in Chinese organizations in general has been undertaken by many scholars of those organizations in other parts of Southeast Asia, as well as in China proper. Most notably, in his book Community and Politics: The Chinese in Colonial Singapore and Malaysia, historian Yen Ching-hwang points out that social relations determined by kinship and dialect ties composed only part of the overseas Chinese social milieu; he opines that class status and class affiliations also had great significance in ordering the overseas Chinese world. He bases his fundamental analysis on two platforms: firstly, that the overseas Chinese community was an immigrant community, a subordinate community in terms of local government, and largely an urban community; and secondly, that Chinese society divided itself into a three-class paradigm¹³⁹ which consisted of (from the top down) *Shang* (merchants),

¹³⁸ Esherick and Rankin, *Chinese Local Elites*, 9.

¹³⁹ Here, Yen presents a modified version of the social structure originally described by Wang Gungwu in his works “Traditional Leadership in a New Nation: The Chinese in Malaya and Singapore” in *Leadership and Authority: A Symposium*, G. Wijeyawardene (Singapore: Center of Southeast Asian

Shi (educated elite), and *Gong* (workers). He further suggests – as did Ho Ping-ti, Keith Schoppa, and Mary Rankin in the case of local gentry in Mainland China – that great mobility and fluidity existed in this social structure, especially between the upper *Gong* class and the lower *Shang* class.¹⁴⁰

In addition to profession, wealth and property ownership also served as a measure for social class and as an entrepôt into an entirely different lifestyle of leisure and plenty enjoyed only by the wealthiest echelons of the merchant class.¹⁴¹ According to Yen, this wealth-based class distinction proved important not only within the Chinese community itself, but also to colonial authorities. Speaking of the British in the Straits Settlements, he writes,

As wealth was an important prerequisite for Chinese community leadership, the wealthy capitalists were given leadership status, and those among them who were able, charitable, and with ambition would become leaders of the whole community. In the choice of leadership for the dialect and clan organizations, the wealthy were readily accepted as leaders because they commanded high status and prestige in society and were able to make substantial donations when required.¹⁴²

For the wealthy, native place organizations also offered opportunities for leadership that led to increased visibility and greater prestige, not only within ones' own dialect or kinship group, but also in the overseas Chinese community at large. In terms of the

Studies in the Social Sciences, University of Singapore, University of Malaya Press, 1968), 210; and Gungwu Wang, *Community and Nation: Essays on Southeast Asia and the Chinese* (Singapore: Asian Studies Association of Australia, Heinemann Educational Books (Asia), 1981), 162.

¹⁴⁰ Yen, *Community and Politics*, 3-5. Unlike the *Shang* and *Gong* classes, the *Shi* classification was largely an issue of training and education; therefore, it was less freely accessible to those striving for upward social or economic mobility.

¹⁴¹ Yen, *Community and Politics*, 7-9.

¹⁴² Yen, *Community and Politics*, 9.

leaders themselves, Yen names seniority, social standing, and integrity as the three most important criteria upon which leaders were chosen.¹⁴³

In his epic study of Hankow, William Rowe also reluctantly acknowledges the importance of wealth in determining eligibility for leadership in the guilds of Hankow, writing that for *huiguan* seeking leaders, “personal wealth and professional success constituted the best evidence of the financial capability needed to manage the collective accounts.”¹⁴⁴ But despite admitting the interrelationship of wealth and local power, Rowe treats the notion of wealth as a golden ticket into *huiguan* aristocracy with some suspicion. Rowe adeptly communicates the idea of a changing economic environment and its socio-economic repercussions within Chinese native place organizations, and while this notion accurately reflects aspects of Indochina’s Chinese kinship organizations, the model is not a perfect fit for colonial Southeast Asia. Some scholars have portrayed wealth in the overseas Chinese community as a three- to four-generation parabolic arch, where wealth accrues and vanishes, sometimes in less than a hundred years. In this paradigm, familial ties could be extremely significant in the short term but were unlikely to endure for a dozen or more generations. Additionally, the goal for many overseas Chinese was to return to their native place to live out their retirements in familiar and comfortable surroundings. Also, trouble with the French authorities encouraged or even forced some powerful Chinese to leave their positions of authority and make new beginnings elsewhere.

The notion of wealth and status determining eligibility for leadership within the Chinese community also finds support in the writings of anthropologist Lawrence Crissman. Crissman maintains that the fundamental criterion for leadership is wealth. If this wealth is combined with a foreign education that allows the leader to

¹⁴³ Yen, *Community and Politics*, 41-2.

¹⁴⁴ Rowe, *Commerce and Society*, 325-6.

communicate freely with the government in charge, the community only benefits from that knowledge. For an organization to wield any power in a local system, the leaders must have the money to gain access to positions of power throughout the community as a whole. This leads nicely to Crissman's second point on leadership, which is that leaders of the overseas Chinese community typically overlapped and were closely interrelated. Wealthy leaders quite simply had greater access to membership on committees and on the governing bodies of the high-level organizations that represented the Chinese community as a whole.¹⁴⁵

In Indochina, overseas Chinese themselves acknowledged wealth as a primary factor in determining both eligibility for and the potential for success as a congregation president. When Lam Khoan attempted to resign the presidency of Gia Định's Cantonese congregation shortly after his election to the post, he pleaded eloquently with Gia Định's Administrator to allow his dismissal on primarily economic grounds. "The motives that have led me to this resolution are first, the modesty of my resources which will never allow me to meet the expenses that my new office will impose upon me, and also, the remoteness of my place of residence from the [congregation headquarters]."¹⁴⁶ Recognizing the financial burden colonial laws helped to impose upon presidents, as well, one imagines, as the futility of forcing someone to take a position of authority they themselves did not wish to occupy, the Lieutenant Governor agreed to Lam Khoan's dismissal within a matter of days.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁵ Lawrence W. Crissman, "The Segmentary Structure of Urban Overseas Chinese Communities" *Man: The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute (new series)* 2, no 2 (June 1967), 199-200.

¹⁴⁶ Letter from Lam Khoan to the Administrator of Gia Định, 2 November 1892, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.13/271(16). [sic: Based on the chronology of letters and responses concerning this incident, this letter was most likely misdated by Lam Khoan and was in fact written in 1893.]

¹⁴⁷ Arrêté of the Lt. Governor of Cochinchina, 16 November 1893, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.13/271(16).

Although several factors were indispensable qualifications for rule, wealth is uniquely quantifiable. Integrity, honesty, and social standing are a bit harder to measure than economic status, which is revealed through things as large as a vast financial network or as small as a merchant's donations to the local *huiguan*. Both types of indicators might reveal a merchant's economic status. In the case of Ly Dang, the Cantonese merchant discussed in Chapter 4, his substantial economic domain was clearly detailed in French accounts of his bankruptcy.¹⁴⁸ On the other hand, the Kong-Fong-Tai Company, which was the business first started by Ly Dang's father when he arrived in Cholon in the 1870's, appears on a temple stele from 1898 in the second category of donations to Cholon's Cantonese *huiguan*, yet another indication of the family's local prestige.¹⁴⁹ Ly Dang's early business partner, Phong Nhut, whose personal businesses are not as clearly delineated, also appears in historical records as the president of Cholon's Chinese Chamber of Commerce in the mid-1910's, thus indicating his own prominence in the economic life of Cholon's Chinese community.¹⁵⁰

Financial stability was an absolute necessity in the life of any overseas Chinese leader, primarily because those leaders had to set examples of generosity for their congregations when the community required certain facilities and when the native place needed relief or improvement. Of course, as historian Elizabeth Sinn has pointed out, philanthropy could exist alongside self-interest: "for individuals and groups who were marginalized, philanthropy was a means by which they could be elevated to

¹⁴⁸ CAOM, INDO GGI 19223.

¹⁴⁹ Li Tana and Nguyen Cam Thuy, *Bia Chu Han trong Hoi quan nguoi Hoa tai Thanh pho Ho Chi Minh* (Ha Noi, Vietnam: Nha Xuat Ban Khoa Hoc Xa Hoi, 1999), 297. According to the stele, Kong Fong Tai donated 150 yuan to the temple, the second highest category of donations with only three donors in the whole community giving the most money, donations of 300 yuan.

¹⁵⁰ *Nan Viet Zhonghua Zongshanghui: Wushi zhounian jinian kan* (Cholon: La Chambre de Commerce chinoise du Sud-Vietnam, no date).

mainstream society.”¹⁵¹ But also, in the French colonial arena, a congregation president was ultimately responsible for any remuneration that might be required by colonial authorities as a result of acts committed by congregation members. In a colonial environment, Chinese traditions were not always allowed to endure.

The Roles and Responsibilities of the Chef

Colonialism’s economic imperatives further enhanced the power of the *congrégations* in the overseas Chinese community. In 1884, the French instituted a head tax for “foreign asiatics” residing in Indochinese territory. This tax existed for the explicit purpose of obtaining substantial revenue for the state from the resident Chinese population. Under the *congrégation* system, the *chef* of the *congrégation* was given the responsibility of ensuring that all members of his *congrégation* paid the taxes that they owed. Although the *chef* himself was exempt from this head tax, he was responsible for making up the difference between the amount owed and the amount collected out of his own pocket. The French required the submission of updated congregation rolls by the president every three months, and the payment of taxes based upon those rolls, but other than that, the French eschewed involvement in the day-to-day functioning of each congregation, leaving the running of them largely up to the Chinese themselves.¹⁵²

The *chef* also bore official responsibility for his congregation members’ behavior. The French administration reserved the right to hold the *chef* personally responsible for any malfeasance on the part of *congrégation* members; therefore, colonial law provided him with broad authority to sanction and punish errant

¹⁵¹ Elizabeth Sinn, “Moving Bones: Hong Kong’s Role as an In-between Place in the Chinese Diaspora” (paper presented at the annual meeting of Association of Asian Studies, Washington, DC, April 4-7, 2002), 19.

¹⁵² Nguyen Quoc Dinh, *The Chinese Congregations*, 73.

congréganistes.¹⁵³ The *chef* possessed authority extending from minor fines to be imposed upon wayward members all the way up to deportation for more serious offenses. A member of a *congrégation* could not immigrate to Indochina without the approval of the *chef*, nor could he depart the country without the *chef's* written consent. Any change of residence within the colony required the approval of all *chefs* involved in the move, and a *chef's* repudiation of an individual resulted in that person's immediate removal from the colony at the expense of the *congrégation* involved.¹⁵⁴ As the legal representative of the congregation, each congregation president possessed the right to institute legal proceedings in French court in the name of the congregation; conversely, groups or individuals seeking redress from the congregation could name the president as defendant when their complaints reached the court.¹⁵⁵

Most significantly, colonial law guaranteed the *chef* right of access to the French administration if he ever required assistance in managing or policing his *congrégation*. This power extended far beyond the authority typically granted to the colonial police because even though French law allowed police to intervene only upon the commission of illegal acts, the police could intervene at any time upon the request of the *chef*.¹⁵⁶ Under French law, members of a *congrégation* exercised only one formal restraint over the power of a *chef de congrégation*: the power of election. In return, the price paid by the president could be stiff. As Nguyen Quoc Dinh wrote, "All infractions of Indochinese law...committed by a congregation are imputed to its

¹⁵³ William 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 (Jun 1969), 284.

¹⁵⁴ Willmott, "Congregations and Associations," 285.

¹⁵⁵ Nguyen Quoc Dinh, *The Chinese Congregations*, 77-8.

¹⁵⁶ Nguyen Quoc Dinh, *The Chinese Congregations*, 131.

president; he is the one who is personally incriminated: he is punished, and this may include depriving him of his liberty.”¹⁵⁷

Not all presidential responsibilities involved legal matters. As a function of its role as provider of mutual aid to its congregants, congregations assisted newly arrived Chinese with settling in to their new environment. To this end, the congregation president was required to help members find work in the colony, and to stand as a guarantor with potential employers if required. Additionally, the president was responsible for distributing loans from the congregation’s common fund to new arrivals or to indigent members in need.¹⁵⁸

Nguyen Quoc Dinh emphasizes one of the primary difficulties facing a congregation president, especially in the larger cities. Big businessmen and powerful industrialists often avoided roles as officers in the congregations because of the tremendous amount of time consumed by such responsibilities; however, even though they preferred to expend their time in pursuit of profit, they remained keenly aware of their status within the congregational hierarchy. In other words, being wealthier and more powerful than the president from a business perspective, they felt no qualms about ordering the president around or disregarding his directives. In that sense, the congregation president retained a certain degree of dependency upon wealthier members. To combat this problem, French law granted the president the right to levy fines against intransigent members for all manner of unacceptable behaviors.¹⁵⁹ In practice, I have seen no evidence of such a fine being levied against a prominent congregant for, in effect, being bossy. The political repercussions of such boldness on the part of the president would likely have been fatal. Nevertheless, it was an option retained by the office of congregation president.

¹⁵⁷ Nguyen Quoc Dinh, *The Chinese Congregations*, 88.

¹⁵⁸ Nguyen Quoc Dinh, *The Chinese Congregations*, 118.

¹⁵⁹ Nguyen Quoc Dinh, *The Chinese Congregations*, 118-120.

After being duly elected, the president remained in office for a four-year term. He could not abandon his office by simple resignation; outside of receiving special permission from the French administration, only death, departure from Indochina, or removal for criminal cause allowed the president to escape.¹⁶⁰ During this term, the president existed as the individual solely responsible for all activities of the congregation: all money owed, all damages done, all costs incurred by the French, all taxes due. Despite all of the privileges of the office, this last fact proved the downfall of many a congregation president. Ignace Bou, the president of Ha Tien's Hainam congregation, was no exception to this rule, and it is to him that we now turn our attention.

The Fall from Grace of Ignace Bou

It seems unlikely in the extreme that large numbers of congrégation officers in Indochina enjoyed literati status back in their Chinese native places; however, the inclusion of education and social standing as primary factors in assessing an individual's suitability for leadership certainly applied to the Indochinese case as well. Arguably, the imposition of colonial systems in mainland and maritime Southeast Asia resulted in a redefinition of the "Shi" ideal among members of the overseas Chinese community, as familiarity with Confucian classics fell behind knowledge of French, English, and Dutch in terms of practical benefits to everyday life. In the instance of Ignace Bou, the elected president of the Hainam congrégation in Cochinchina's Ha-Tien province, the man's ability to speak and write French contributed greatly to his effectiveness as a congrégational leader, as well as to his ability to manipulate the French colonial system to the benefit of his congregants.

¹⁶⁰ Nguyen Quoc Dinh, *The Chinese Congregations*, 120-121.

In August 1896, the president of Hainam's congrégation in Ha-Tien, a man by the name of Lam Khai Bui, resigned his presidential office and returned to Hainan Island to attend to funeral arrangements for his recently deceased mother. That Lam Khai Bui intended to depart Cochinchina for an extended period of time seems quite clear from his letter. Although he could conceivably have requested that his vice-president assume presidential responsibilities for a brief period, he specifically requested permission to resign instead, implying that his return to China was a long-term relocation.¹⁶¹

The Cochinchinese administration granted Lam a compassionate dismissal and initiated procedures to fill the unexpectedly vacant presidential post, but they immediately encountered confusion when the man chosen to head the Hainam Congrégation until the next scheduled election in 1898 officially represented himself under three different names. The first two names, Y-Hap-Vo and Y-Hiếp Võ,¹⁶² represented the Chinese and Vietnamese pronunciations of his name and thus occasioned little French interest. The problem arose with the third name, Ignace Bou, which was the nominative most often used by the man when communicating with the local and regional French administrations.¹⁶³

The Lieutenant Governor of Cochinchina hesitated to approve Ignace Bou's appointment as congregation president for fear that some malevolent ulterior motive might underlie his use of several names. Instead, he contacted the Administrator of Ha-Tien to request more information on the president-elect. In this report, a bit more

¹⁶¹ Letter from Lam Khai Bui to the Administrator of Ha Tien, 7 August 1896, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.14/021(2).

¹⁶² Y-Hap-Vo Ky is the transliteration used in the French sources for Ignace Bou's Chinese name, and Y-Hiếp-Võ Kỳ is the typical Vietnamese transliteration. In both cases, the suffix "ky" was taken to mean, among other things, that Ignace Bou was the Chief of his own commercial house or business.

¹⁶³ See relevant correspondences in TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH: IA.14/021(2), IA.14/021(3), and IA.14/022(5) for Bou's pattern of name use.

information about Ignace Bou's experience and life come to light. First of all, Bou was Roman Catholic, baptized by priests who also gave him his name, Ignace. As it is impossible to say whether Bou was baptized at birth or was converted to Catholicism later in life, we do not know if Ignace Bou was actually his original name. The same problem holds true for the Chinese and Vietnamese transliterations of his name,¹⁶⁴ which were alleged to be a sinicization and a vietnamization of the Christian name Ignace. Despite an absence of clarity on this matter, he most likely kept his original surname, Bou.¹⁶⁵ Secondly, Ignace Bou owned his own company, an ownership he did not share with any significant partner, and worked for his own profit, rather than owning a company subordinated to other corporate interests in Indochina or in China proper.

Thus, despite the brief concern caused by his name, the Lieutenant-Governor of Cochinchina formally declared Ignace Bou the President of Ha-Tien's Hainam congregation on October 13, 1896.¹⁶⁶ His election as interim president suggests that he was a well-respected member of Ha-Tien's Hainam Congrégation and this impression is reinforced by the report submitted by the Administrator of Ha-Tien, who vouched for his suitability as president and offered no suggestions of previous inappropriate activities or acquaintances on Bou's part.¹⁶⁷ Most significantly for the purposes of this discussion, Ignace Bou was not a newcomer to the overseas Chinese political arena. He had already enjoyed at least one term of office as a congregational

¹⁶⁴ Y-Hap-Vo Ky and Y-Hiêp-Võ Kỳ, respectively.

¹⁶⁵ Letter from the Administrator of Ha Tien to The Lt. Governor of Cochinchine, 3 October 1896, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.14/021(2).

¹⁶⁶ Order of the Lt. Governor of Cochinchina, 14 October 1896, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.14/021(2).

¹⁶⁷ Letter from the Administrator of Ha Tien to The Lt. Governor of Cochinchine, 3 October 1896, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.14/021(2). Receiving a clean letter of support was not the sinecure it might seem. French Administrators were often quick to report any rumors or alleged incidents involving a Chinese candidate for office, no matter how unsubstantiated, most likely in an attempt to shift blame from themselves should any unrest or scandal unfold involving the Congregation in question.

president in Ha-Tien province's city of Honchong,¹⁶⁸ a position from which he formally resigned in 1895.¹⁶⁹

Ignace Bou's tenure as Congregation president in Honchong reveals a number of interesting facets of congregational politics and life. In the spring of 1895, Ignace Bou wrote a letter to the French Administrator of Ha-Tien requesting the authorization to increase the common taxes imposed upon all congregation members from the 50 cents originally allowed to an even piastre per person.¹⁷⁰ He based this request upon a table of congregational expenses he compiled for the Administrator's perusal, in which the congregation's overhead expenses were explicitly detailed. These expenses were as follows:¹⁷¹

1 vice-president in Hatien	200\$
1 bookkeeper	276\$
1 orderly	
1 cook and 2 coolies	250\$
Purchase of rice and other foodstuffs	300\$
Purchase of tobacco, tea, and alcohol	50\$
Festivals at the pagoda	50\$
Price of repatriation, burial, and food for prisoners	100\$
Completion of a new pagoda	100\$
Annual subsidy for the maintenance of the pagoda	200\$
For a total of:	1606\$

The above table provides us with an excellent general overview not only of the expenses weathered by a congregation in Cochinchina, but also of that congregation's cultural, social, and colonial responsibilities and how each impacted the organization's

¹⁶⁸ Letter, 1895, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.14/021(3).

¹⁶⁹ Letter from the Administrator of Ha Tien to The Lt. Governor of Cochinchine, 3 October 1896, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.14/021(2).

¹⁷⁰ Letter from the Administrator of Ha-Tien to the Governor of Cochinchine, 8 May 1895, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.14/021(3).

¹⁷¹ Letter from the Administrator of Ha-Tien to the Governor of Cochinchine, 8 May 1895, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.14/021(3). This is my translation of the table presented to the Administrator of Ha-Tien by Ignace Bou himself. All amounts listed are in piastres and although there is no explanation of why, 80\$ piastres is added to the final tally without stipulating its purpose.

annual budget. The figures provided by Bou indicate that, for this Hainam congregation, 21.88% of the annual budget went to pagoda-related expenses, including the celebration of Hainanese rituals and local holidays.¹⁷² Although the rice and assorted foodstuffs most likely played some role in these celebrations, they are not explicit reminders of and connections to native place and culture as are pagoda-related activities, and so those expenses, along with the purchase of tea, tobacco and alcohol, have been relegated to the category of social expenses, which also occupied 21.88% of the total annual budget. As the following photograph indicates, congregation temples housed cultural treasures from each native place. Proper adornment and maintenance of these meeting halls could be quite expensive, as could appropriate offerings for local deities and ghosts.

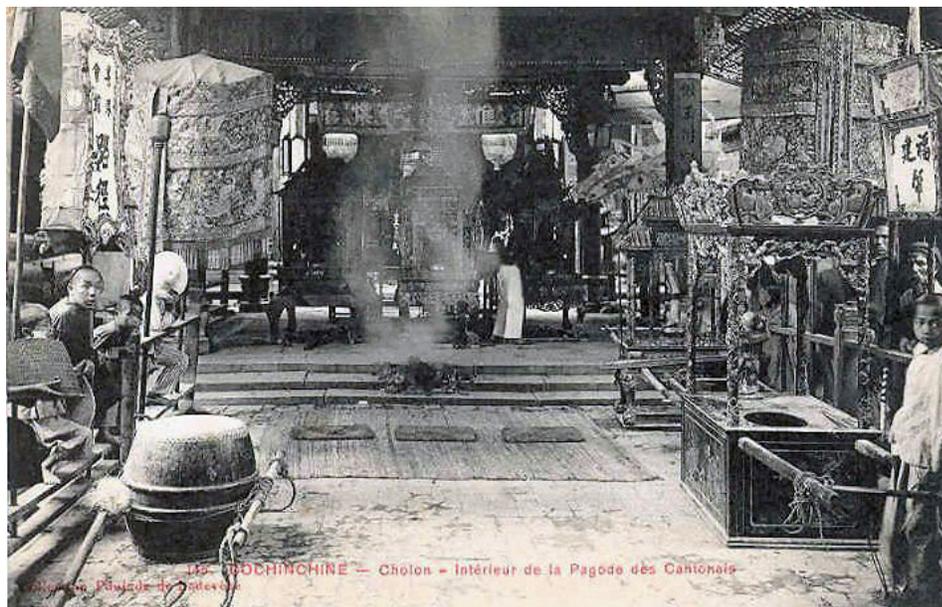


Figure 7 Inside a temple¹⁷³

¹⁷² In this particular instance, the completion of the new pagoda under construction represented 6.25% of the annual expenditures in that particular year, which suggests that in a more typical year, the Hainam congregation would have spent 15.63% of its annual budget on those celebrations.

¹⁷³ http://images.google.com/imgres?imgurl=http://hinxua.free.fr/autrefois/chinois/Cholon_la_procession_du_dragon.jpg&imgrefurl=http://hinxua.free.fr/autrefois/chinois/photo_chinois_vn.htm&h=457&w=719&sz=97&tbnid=BguALWOgyy. Feb 12, 2006.

The final category of colonially mandated expenses includes not only cost of repatriation, funerals, and prison food, but also the salary of an accountant, whose job was to ensure the congregation's freedom from French displeasure over tax and residency discrepancies. This category potentially totaled as much as 23.5% of the congregation's annual budget. While this detailed information might not seem particularly interesting to the casual reader, the percentages shown here give some indication of the importance of French demands upon the congregation when compared to the more traditional social and cultural roles of the organization in general. The fiduciary parity conferred upon colonial requirements, although essential to the smooth functioning of the congregation within a colonial environment, still demonstrates the financial commitment required of each congregation to French law.

Honchong's Hainam congregation totaled 1300 members, which, when compared to the 1606\$ piastres of annual expense, clearly represents more than one piastre per member. In that light, Ignace Bou's request to raise the common tax seems quite reasonable, but the Administrator of Ha-Tien had other ideas about Bou's underlying motivations. On May 8, 1895 in a letter to the Governor of Cochinchina in Saigon, the Administrator wrote,

The congregation of Hainam includes 1300 individuals, each of whom should pay more than one piastre if the figures indicated above were exact. But the president of the congregation does not say that 150 large planters in Honchong each remit from 20\$ to 30\$ piastres per year to him; that for any requests for licenses for cutting or other [requests] addressed to the administration, he receives around 50 cents; that for every passport he demands the same amount plus the price, etc...etc...It is also probable that the amount of the expense for food (600\$) is diminished considerably by the voluntary contributions of the numerous members of the congregation which it is obliged to receive at its table.

As for the price of food for Chinese arrested for defaulting on their residence cards and then released after payment of rates, refunds are always pursued by the congregations that pay in advance which has the

effect, in most cases, of [resulting in] no charge [to the congregation in question.]¹⁷⁴

This 1895 letter was just the beginning for Ignace Bou. The man's financial troubles achieved legendary proportions by the end of his tenure as congregation president, and these troubles eventually led to his flight from the colony to avoid prosecution by the French for what they perceived as deliberate fraud. The tale of Bou's downfall sharply defines the opposing interests of the French colons and local Chinese residents. All of the trouble began with a change in the local Administrator.

In 1904, Ha Tien's Administrator summoned a meeting of members of all Chinese residents in the district in order to verify the congregational registers, and thereby ensure that each congregation was being taxed appropriately. Based on this meeting, for 1905, the rolls for the two Hainam congregations of Ha Tien and Phu Quoc were reduced from 2000 members, a number Cudenet suggested had been arbitrarily assigned by his Administrative predecessor, LaGrange, to 1412 members. LaGrange had, in the past, been accused of abusing his authority by applying it arbitrarily and without due consideration. According to LaGrange's residual estimate, the combined congregations totaled 2031 in 1905. Cudenet himself took action to avoid a similar criticism of capriciousness. "I contented myself with 1412 Chinese whom, in November and December, I saw for myself and who gave me their cards against the receipts. Is this arbitrary?"¹⁷⁵

The Administrator's defensiveness arose from a complaint sent in August 1905 by the French Attorney, Cuniae, on behalf of Ignace Bou, complaining that Cudenet used his authority arbitrarily and brutally to fix an improper number upon the Chinese

¹⁷⁴ Letter from the Administrator of Ha-Tien to the Governor of Cochinchine, 8 May 1895, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.14/021(3).

¹⁷⁵ Letter from Administrator Cudenet of Ha Tien to the Lt GouCoch in Saigon, 22 August 1905, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.14/022(5).

community in Ha Tien, thereby causing them to bear an impossible tax burden.¹⁷⁶ Cudenet blamed the entire fiasco on Article 4 of the law of February 19, 1890, which decreed that immigrants could be removed from a congregation's tax rolls if there was proof that they had departed the colony. Citing this law, Bou insisted that Ha Tien's Hainam congregation only contained 680 members, despite what Cudenet maintained was clear evidence to the contrary. This alleged dishonesty notwithstanding, the Administrator claimed that he intended to ask for a dispensation for the 114 counts of unpaid registration tax that he believed the Hainam congregation still owed, although he did not publicize this fact "in order not to stem the zeal of the agents charged with tracking Chinese fraud."¹⁷⁷ Bou's own guilty conscience, implied the Administrator, led him to attack the tax changes so vociferously.¹⁷⁸

Despite Ignace Bou's charges against him, Cudenet was most disturbed by the allegations of brutality and dishonesty proffered by the lawyer Cuniae. "I well know the legends that are passed on from generation to generation in certain colonial chambers: civil servants in the Colonies are true petty tyrants for whom misappropriation of public funds, abuse of power, etc, etc, are common currency."¹⁷⁹ Cudenet did not bother to insist that his own character was above reproach; instead, he urged the lawyer to make good on his threat to take legal action against him.

Consequently, I have the honor to ask you, Sir Governor, to call back Mr. Cuniae [and tell him] . . . that if his customer Ignace Bou considers [himself] hurt by a tax roll established arbitrarily, he is free to ask the

¹⁷⁶ Letter from Administrator Cudenet of Ha Tien to the Lt GouCoch in Saigon, 22 August 1905, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.14/022(5).

¹⁷⁷ Letter from Administrator Cudenet of Ha Tien to the Lt GouCoch in Saigon, 22 August 1905, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.14/022(5).

¹⁷⁸ Letter from Administrator Cudenet of Ha Tien to the Lt GouCoch in Saigon, 22 August 1905, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.14/022(5).

¹⁷⁹ Letter from Administrator Cudenet of Ha Tien to the Lt GouCoch in Saigon, 22 August 1905, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.14/022(5).

courts to apply article 174 of the Penal Code to the Administrator of Ha Tien.

Also, I shall exercise my right (article 373 of the same code) by asking of Justice that Mr. Cuniae give me satisfaction for the slanderous imputations contained in the letter addressed to you by him.¹⁸⁰

That Cudenet's bitterness was directed not at Ignace Bou, but at Cuniae, the French attorney working for the Chinese president, seems quite telling. The Administrator never acknowledges that in this case, the Chinese leader employed the Frenchman, and only the insult that the Frenchman delivered hit the mark. It is quite clear from his letter that Cudenet was fundamentally indifferent to any opinion, good or bad, that a Chinese resident had of him. That being said, Cudenet's rebuttal rings with indignant sincerity, and it is hard to imagine that his writing was mere performance and he was actually corrupt. Implications of his corruption seem even more dubious when viewed in the light of more than 10 years of tax disputes while Ignace Bou headed the Hainam congregation. The fact that Bou apparently chose to flee the colony shortly after the incident described above further emphasizes the likelihood that Cudenet was the more scrupulous of the two.

Bou's disappearance from the Colony seemed to take everyone by surprise. In August 1905, he sent a formal request to the Lieutenant Governor, asking that he be allowed to return to Hainan to take care of pressing business he had there. Specifically, he maintained that his presence in Hainan was required in order for him to liquidate the interest he held in Hainan's maritime shipping operation. According to Bou, the Administrator of Ha Tien had endorsed his request to return home.¹⁸¹ Bou's desire to leave the colony for a month required the approval of the Lieutenant

¹⁸⁰ Letter from Administrator Cudenet of Ha Tien to the Lt GouCoch in Saigon, 22 August 1905, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.14/022(5). Underlining appears in original text.

¹⁸¹ Letter from Ignace Bou to the Lt. GouCoch in Saigon, 7 August 1905, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.14/022(5). The Administrator's endorsement can be neither confirmed nor denied.

Governor because his absence left Ha-Tien's Hainam congregation without formal leadership. Apparently, Bou never returned.

By September 1905, the colonial government had taken action to reduce the taxes owed to them by Hainam congregation. Initially, the French recouped 370\$18 piastres by confiscating a portion of Ignace Bou's pepper harvest;¹⁸² however, even after that seizure, Ha Tien's Hainam congregation still owed the French government the staggering sum of 7,363\$50 piastres. By this time, Administrator Cudenet was actively colluding with the Lieutenant Governor to recoup the colonial losses. Ignace Bou appeared to have fled the colony to escape the inevitable financial repercussions of his lax accounting practices and the French strove to recover the money owed them. At first, the local Administration considered recouping its losses by seizing all of Ignace Bou's goods and property and then auctioning off that property to the highest bidder.

Though this plan seemed sound, it had two major flaws. In the first place, the Ha Tien area had suffered fairly significant financial losses in 1904 and 1905. A November 2 cyclone destroyed large portions of the pepper crop, and the impact of that natural catastrophe was trebled by an enormous depreciation in the price of pepper, which went from 35-40 piastres per picul in 1904, to a mere 25 piastres per picul in 1905.¹⁸³ Additionally, members of the Chinese community were traditionally reluctant to engage in a bidding war over property confiscated by the French from a member of their own community. This left the Colonial Administration facing the very real possibility that even were they to auction off the goods, nobody would be willing to buy them. Alternatively, Cudenet suggested that the Administration recoup its

¹⁸² Letter from Asst Administrator Granboulan to the Lt GouCoch in Saigon, 26 April 1906, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.14/022(5).

¹⁸³ Letter from Administrator Cudenet of Ha Tien to the Lt GouCoch in Saigon, 5 September 1905, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.14/022(5).

losses by fining each member of the community a portion of the tax amount outstanding, an amount to be determined based upon each individual's financial situation. He argued against a punitive tax increase, suggesting that increasing local taxes to salvage the owed sum, especially in light of Ha Tien's disastrous year, "would be urging them to immigrate to Cambodia, where the tax rate is lower and where numerous uncultivated plots of land exist, suitable to be converted into pepper plantations."¹⁸⁴

In Ha Tien's political report from March and April 1906, the Assistant Administrator Granboulan reported that except for the Hainam congregation, all of Ha Tien's Chinese congregations had paid their personal registration taxes in full. The Hainam congregation owed a total of 6,920\$00 piastres to the colonial government, 768\$50 piastres of which consisted of unpaid head taxes from 1904 "for which [official] dispensations will certainly be necessary by the end of the year."¹⁸⁵ While this resolution might have signaled the end for the president's ambitions in Cochinchina, Ignace was apparently unwilling to admit defeat. The disgraced leader attempted unsuccessfully to maintain his influence in Ha-Tien through his son, who joined the congrégation's presidential race upon the departure of his father. In this instance, the nullification of the election results by Cochinchinese authorities reveals the impact of colonial values and interests upon the functioning of Ha-Tien's Hainam congrégation. Practices that might have been customary in China were forced to contend with French hegemony in order to survive, leaving a potential gap between what Ha-Tien's Hainam community might have chosen for itself, and what actually resulted from their decision-making process.

¹⁸⁴ Letter from Administrator Cudenet of Ha Tien to the Lt GouCoch in Saigon, 5 September 1905, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.14/022(5).

¹⁸⁵ Extract from Ha Tien's Political Report for the months of March and April 1904, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.14/022(5).

Conclusion

In her book, *Capitalism and Confrontation in Sumatra's Plantation Belt*, historian Ann Stoler has discussed issues of colonial hegemony and indigenous resistance to the colonially-imposed labor paradigm, citing the phenomenon of avoidance as a primary means of labor resistance to colonial control.¹⁸⁶ Historian Michael Adas makes a similar point in his article "From Avoidance to Confrontation," which focuses largely upon colonial Burma and Java.¹⁸⁷ Although Stoler and Adas are interested in avoidance as practiced by the most subaltern populations of Southeast Asia, within the paradigm of colonialism, overseas Chinese were also subordinated to colonial will, making the question of confrontation or avoidance equally applicable to them.

Although overseas Chinese leadership typically enjoyed elite status in French Indochina, Indochina's most powerful Chinese often avoided presidential office – and thereby colonial entanglements – as well, unwilling to burden themselves with the many inconveniences the presidential office entailed. In this way, Indochina's most powerful Chinese avoided French control by ostensibly remaining outside the official congregation structure. In fact, this distance from community control was somewhat imaginary. Wealthy and powerful congregants were known to treat their congregation presidents like lackeys, convinced that they ruled by the sufferance of their social and economic betters. Colonial authorities attempted to mitigate this problem by making the congregation president a direct representative of the French with direct access to the colonial hierarchy, a commission that included the right to levy fines upon recalcitrant congregants; however, the very existence of this authority likely created

¹⁸⁶ Ann Laura Stoler, *Capitalism and Confrontation in Sumatra's Plantation Belt, 1870-1979* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, 1995), 6-13.

¹⁸⁷ Michael Adas, "From Avoidance to Confrontation," in *Colonialism and Culture*, ed. Nicholas B. Dirks (Ann Arbor: The U. of Michigan Press, 1992), 89-126.

more problems for the hapless president than it solved. After all, pulled between French colonial authorities and the Chinese elite of his own congregation, the life of the president had little to recommend it.

This is not meant to imply that a congregation president wielded no authority. In fact, a skillful president could catch the French in the trap of their own colonial imperatives, as was the case with Ignace Bou and Ha Tien's Hainam congregation. When the years long legal battle over the congregation's head tax was finally decided in favor of the local administration, Ha Tien's administrator found himself unable to fine the Hainam congregation for its delinquency. Colonialism's most pervasive imperative, the crowning glory or catastrophic downfall of many a colonial official, was profit. In Ha Tien, this reality proved to be the saving grace of the congregation. The border between Cochinchina and Cambodia in the area of Ha Tien was, for all intents and purposes, completely imaginary. Oppressive or punitive fines imposed in Cochinchina would quite likely have forced a high percentage of Ha Tien's Hainanese across the border into Cambodia, severely impacting the revenue available to Ha Tien's administration. Unwilling to lose Chinese revenue, even to the Protectorate, Ha Tien's Administrator begrudgingly abandoned any attempt to punish the congregation for the misdeeds of its president.

CHAPTER 4: THE BANKRUPTCY OF CHOLON'S LY FAMILY, 1871-1913

Those who made good in one way or another are remembered; far more numerous, and, for the countries of Nan Yang as a whole, far more important, are the hundreds of thousands of forgotten men, those who died as they lived in poverty, or returned penniless to China.

T'ien Ju-k'ang, *The Chinese of Sarawak*¹⁸⁸

In June of 1913, the bankruptcy of a prominent Cantonese businessman by the name of Ly Dang illuminated the complex networks connecting Chinese businesses across Southeast Asia and in China proper.¹⁸⁹ Ly Dang was a true entrepreneur, a scrappy and resilient individual who, upon encountering financial ruin, gathered up the pieces of his shattered financial empire to make another run at success. He was also a savvy businessman who sought to extend his interests beyond the traditional realms of import-export companies and transportation firms and make his fortune by exploiting internationally significant trades and opportunities for riskier, but substantially greater, profit.

Ly Dang's story is enthralling for several reasons. First, it offers a rare glimpse into the life of a Chinese entrepreneur living in Cholon during the twilight of the old empire and the birth of the new Chinese Republic. It also provides a tentative map of the growth of Chinese business networks across local, regional, and even international boundaries. Of the big picture, Ly Dang's pecuniary experiences expose the vulnerability of Southeast Asian economic enterprises to politics, climate, culture, and foreign intervention at both local and international levels. As for Indochina's Chinese community, Ly Dang's story rests on a foundation of business relationships

¹⁸⁸ Ju-k'ang T'ien, *The Chinese of Sarawak* (Kuching: Malaysia: Resource and Research Centre Committee, 1997), 10.

¹⁸⁹ The facts from this narrative can all be found in the bankruptcy report regarding this case submitted to the Commercial Court in Saigon on June 8, 1913 or, if otherwise specified, in other colonial government correspondence included in the same file: CAOM, INDO GGI 19223.

and inextricably intertwined trade networks that reveal tantalizing hints of the breadth, depth, and scale of the ties between Chinese native-place communities that stretched from China to Indochina and perhaps beyond.

By examining the rise and fall of this particular Chinese merchant, this chapter will explore Ly Dang's own networks in greater detail, not only addressing how he used firms and relationships to face the circumstances or contingencies that arose, but also evaluating how well his particular use of firms and networks served him over the years. In the course of this analysis, the strengths and weaknesses of Ly Dang's firm and network strategies will be evaluated, taking into account the specificities of Ly Dang's colonial environment. In some respects, the most interesting facet of Ly Dang's life is the constant swinging between success and failure of his pecuniary pendulum. Typically, scholars read only of men who succeeded. In the case of Ly Dang, we see an excellent example of a man who experienced both wild success and catastrophic failure. For the purposes of this investigation of networks and hierarchies, it is worthwhile to explain both his successes and his failures. Ly Dang's Indochinese roller coaster ride began before he himself ever left his native place of Canton; like other children of Chinese immigrants and fortune-seekers, Ly Dang's story begins with his father.

Ly Dang Senior Sets the Course:

In 1871, Ly Dang's father, also named Ly Dang,¹⁹⁰ left Guangdong and moved to Cochinchina, where he laid down roots and established his own business. His firm, the Kong-Fong-Tai Company, concerned itself with the importation of goods from China, and he maintained the connections to his native place by affiliating himself with the Cantonese Congregation of Cholon. After laboring diligently for a number of

¹⁹⁰ Hereafter referred to as Ly Dang Senior.

years, Ly Dang Senior's business in Cholon attained such a level of stability and success that he sent back to China, requesting that his sons join him in Cochinchina. The two sons, Ly Hieu So¹⁹¹ and Ly Dang¹⁹², joined their father in Cholon and worked alongside him to make the family business prosper.

Over the years, the business became increasingly successful, and as the family prospered, Ly Dang Senior expanded its influence by purchasing shares in other Southeast Asian companies throughout Cochinchina and Cambodia. This expansion of influence occurred as a result of Ly Dang Senior's ability and willingness to provide venture capital to support the economic endeavors of his Cochinchinese business associates. By the time of the old man's death in 1893, in addition to their ownership of the Kong-Fong-Tai Company, the family owned portions of the Vinh-Duc-Phong Company, a firm based in Phnom Penh with branch offices in Cholon; the Ly-Mau-Long Company, also of Phnom Penh; the Ly-Wo-Hing house of Cholon; the Quan-Lai Company of Chau Doc; and the Kong-Foc-Long Company of Canton. Additionally, during his time in Cochinchina, Ly Dang Senior had gradually acquired property throughout the cities of Cholon and Phnom Penh. The expansion of Ly Dang Senior's business was not haphazard; instead, it followed a common pattern of growth relying upon the two factors most critical to overseas Chinese business development in Indochina: native place ties and the established pathways of major regional marketing routes.

Enmeshed in the social and economic safety net provided by Cochinchina's Cantonese communities in the late 19th century, Ly Dang Senior did not live a solitary life. From the beginning, he enjoyed the support of his native place kinsmen, the members of Cholon's Cantonese congregation. This support was far more than

¹⁹¹ The younger son, also known as Li An

¹⁹² The elder son and the bankrupt subject of this narrative

nominal. Not only did the congrégation help him settle in Cholon, find property, and establish his business, but as Ly Dang Senior prospered, he himself rose in prominence within the congrégation, building personal networks and establishing relationships inside Cholon that gave him access first to regional Cochinchinese networks and later to larger, more international networks. As his prosperity increased, Ly Dang Senior used those same particularistic ties to expand his interests by entering into partnerships with other members of Cholon's Cantonese congrégation; however, admittance to Cholon's inner sanctum was just the beginning. From there, Ly Dang Senior gained access to the regional and international Cantonese networks that provided the foundation for his success. After spreading from Cholon to Phnom Penh and Chau Đoc, Ly Dang Senior reached his own corporate pinnacle. His financial odyssey finally took him back to his native place when he assumed partial ownership of the Kong-Foc-Long Company of Canton.

What made Ly Dang Senior's business expansion so successful? Much of the existing scholarship on Chinese business emphasizes the uniqueness of the network-based Chinese business model in comparison to the hierarchical model presented by Western firms in China. As historian Wong Siu-lun writes, "In the Chinese case, entrepreneurs tend to dominate the market by activating particularistic ties such as regional networks rather than by building up large, impersonal corporations."¹⁹³ Historian William Kirby also makes this point, claiming that "with its own organizational structures and values rooted in networks of family and regional ties, what we may call a 'capitalism with Chinese characteristics' resisted the corporate

¹⁹³ Siu-lun Wong, "Chinese Entrepreneurs and Business Trust" in *Business Networks and Economic Development in East and Southeast Asia*, ed. Gary Hamilton (Hong Kong: Centre of Asian Studies, University of Hong Kong, 1991), 24.

structure.”¹⁹⁴ While the importance of networks to Ly Dang Senior’s business cannot be overstated, it would be a mistake to assume that these networks themselves did not represent a formal business structure with its own firmly established hierarchy. This type of formal hierarchy was embedded in the very structure of the Chinese congregation, an organization where wealth and seniority determined social prominence, and thereby decided leadership as well.

Some background on Chinese congregational networks facilitates a better understanding of the cultural web in which Ly Dang Senior enmeshed himself. The connections emerging from the institution of the congregation were multifaceted. These connections ranged in scope and scale from small, personal connections between local Cantonese¹⁹⁵ businessmen in Cholon to relationships between Cantonese merchants across the five territories of Indochina. From these business and political contacts, relationships back in the native city of Canton evolved, and all of these relationships, from the perspective of the Ly family, functioned within the context of Cochinchinese-based systems of status and prestige. Some of these systems resembled generic overseas Chinese institutions quite closely, while others, because of the long tenure of Chinese merchants and settlers in Indochina, as well as the vagaries of French colonial rule, were unique to Indochina’s overseas Chinese population.

For the purposes of this story, congrégations possess great significance in several respects. As the cornerstone of Chinese social, cultural, religious, political, and economic life in Indochina, congregational membership allowed overseas Chinese to tap into a vast network of personal connections that could assist them in any aspect

¹⁹⁴ William Kirby, “China Unincorporated: Company Law and Business Enterprise in 20th Century China,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 54, no 1 (Feb 1995), 51.

¹⁹⁵ Cantonese refers to the case of Ly Dang, a merchant from Canton’s Nanhai county. During Ly Dang’s Cochinchinese tenure, the original seven congrégations had been reduced to five, which represented the interests of the Cantonese, the Fujianese, the Hainanese, the Chao Zhou, and the Hakka.

of their legal, professional, or personal lives. Intra-congregational contacts assisted Chinese with such things as character references for the colonial government, capital accumulation for local land and real estate deals, and all sides of the labor issue, from helping a new arrival find employment to assisting a wealthy business owner acquire a workforce for his factory or corporation. Inter-congregational contacts, for example, contacts between Cantonese congregations in Tonkin and CochinChina, not only assisted members with capital acquisition for business ventures, but also allowed increased access to regional markets by providing a reliable conduit for the collection of raw materials or the distribution of goods.

Besides the aforementioned roles, congregations fulfilled two additional functions whose importance cannot be overestimated. First, as Chinese organizations that were formally sanctioned and mandated by the French colonial government, congregations legitimized their members in colonial eyes and the importance of congregations in Indochina's Chinese community ensured that matters important to the congregation received, at the very least, a hearing by colonial officials. Secondly, congregations served as direct conduits for contacts with their native places, meaning that a congregation did not just have a personal relationship with its native place, but enjoyed ties backed by the political and economic authority of the Chinese province from which it hailed. Despite the common assumption that overseas Chinese funneled money back to their native places in the form of *unidirectional* remittances to help the locality prosper, in the case of Indochina, private interests based in Chinese native places also occasionally contributed capital directly to Indochinese business ventures. More to the point, companies based in Indochina and their sister companies in Canton or Hong Kong frequently shared ownership among the same handful of Chinese businessmen, some of whom resided permanently in Indochina and some of whom remained permanently in China proper.

Networks alone did not determine the paths of Ly Dang Senior's financial expansion. Or perhaps more accurately, Chinese networks themselves developed along paths predetermined by geography and the natural flow of capital. The colonially established political boundary separating Cochinchina and Cambodia had little to do with history, or even with economic reality. Historically, Mac Thien and his original band of Chinese pioneers had settled in the coastal areas of the present day Ha-Tien province, carving out a territory that included significant parcels of land on both the Cochinchinese and Cambodian sides of the border.¹⁹⁶ Though later political boundaries divided this territory into two parts, merchandise and capital still surged across the political boundary with great ease. Cholon was the urban center into and out of which the vast productive capacity of the Mekong Delta flowed. Even cities such as Phnom Penh paled in comparison to the networking nexus present in Cholon, and Ly Dang Senior's expansion up the Mekong waterways to the Cambodian capital represents not only the natural flow of relationships, but also the fundamental realities of geography and marketing at work in the region.

In short, for Ly Dang Senior, partnership in various firms was not simply a matter of a gentleman's agreement. Based on the concrete examples provided by Ly Dang the son, partnership, in the form of shared corporate ownership, resulted only when a new member offered substantial capital investment into the mix. The official purchase of "shares" in other firms represents a far more formal approach to business in general and to partnership in particular than is indicated by the phrase "social networks." On the one hand, Ly Dang Senior stood as the sole master of his firm, his personal financial domain, but on the other hand, this firm existed as merely a single nexus, albeit a noteworthy one, in the web of the Cochinchinese Cantonese network.

¹⁹⁶ Chingho A. Chen, *Mac Thien Tu and Phrayataksin: A Survey on their Political Stand, Conflicts, and Background*. 7th IAAA conference, [Bangkok, 22-26 August 1977] Vol. 2 1534-1575, (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Press, 1979).

Perhaps more importantly, Ly Dang Senior's interests fit into the extensive regional networks of the Nan Yang Cantonese, a group whose significance in regional trade increased tremendously after Canton became China's premier foreign enclave, thereby establishing the Cantonese in the compradorial role that gave them such a mercantile advantage.¹⁹⁷ In this context, tactically and strategically, the Kong-Fong-Tai Company became Ly Dang Senior's hierarchical base from which to access the financial networks most closely associated with himself, thus providing his original firm with a safety net and source of capital that acted as added insurance in the capricious financial environment of colonial Cochinchina.

Ly Dang Junior Takes the Helm

In 1893, Ly Dang and his brother Ly Hieu So finally had the resources to take their own chances with the family fortune. The shares in multiple businesses across the region and the ownership of significant real estate in Indochina ensured that Ly Dang Senior's death not only left the two sons with substantial wealth, but also gave them the means to maintain and even increase their prosperity if they had the wits and good fortune to do so. Upon the death of their father, the two sons took their inheritances and followed separate but parallel paths. Ly Hieu So returned to China to take the wheel of the Kong-Foc-Long Company, one of the Cantonese companies in which Ly Dang Senior had purchased a percentage prior to his demise. After a short time managing the Kong-Foc-Long Company, Ly Hieu So founded another corporation, the Kong-Hoi-Yun Company based in Hong Kong. As for Ly Dang, he

¹⁹⁷ The Cantonese as compradors is a phenomenon most closely associated with British imperial history in the trading enclaves, but the capital and economic power flowing into the five counties of Guangdong from the newly opened trading enclaves spilled over into other areas of the Nan Yang as well, allowing access to network capital that seems to have been nearly limitless for businessmen like Ly Dang and his brother, Ly Hieu So.

remained in Cholon and took control of the family assets in Cochinchina and in Cambodia.

Like his brother back in Canton, Ly Dang met with great success in the early years of his business. This success is most clearly quantifiable in the case of the Kong-Fong-Tai Company, which was the business first started by Ly Dang's father when he arrived in Cholon in the 1870's. The name Kong-Fong-Tai appears in the second category of donations to Cholon's Cantonese *huiguan* on a temple stele dating from 1898, yet another indication of the family's local prestige;¹⁹⁸ however, 1898 was personally momentous for Ly Dang in other ways. In that year, he joined together with four of his local business associates, men by the names of Nam Hee Emile, Chou Hap, Phung Nhut, and Chuang Hoi, to found a special association named the Kong-Cheong-Seng Society.¹⁹⁹ This group existed for the dual purposes of purchasing the Ksach-Kandal cotton factory in Cambodia from its French owner, M.M. G. Praire and Company, and developing the cotton factory's production and operation for profit.

The Kong-Cheong-Seng Society not only represented Ly Dang's first formal personal economic venture, but it also represents a significant step in terms of his networking capacity and his own economic independence. Kong-Cheong-Seng was not held together by kinship as many of Ly Dang's earlier endeavors had been; rather, native place and connections within the Cholon Chamber of Commerce formed the basis for the Kong-Cheong-Seng partnership. The establishment of this company hints at Ly Dang's future goals and intentions; it is easy to imagine the hope and optimism

¹⁹⁸ Li Tana and Nguyen, *Bia Chu Han*, 297. According to the stele, Kong Fong Tai donated 150 yuan to the temple, the second highest category of donations with only three donors in the whole community giving the most money, donations of 300 yuan. This suggests that Ly Dang's wealth ranked him among the top handful of Cantonese businessmen in Cholon.

¹⁹⁹ Unfortunately, the documents do not spell out the origins of the relationship between Ly Dang and his partners. It seems unlikely that they were closely related because no mention of any of the other partners surfaces during the detailed accounts of Ly Dang's downfall and several of them remained in Indochina long past Ly Dang's abrupt departure from the colony.

with which he embarked upon his financial future at this time, the initiation of his first major interaction with the colonial economic system. By forming the Kong-Cheong-Seng Company with his partners, he had committed himself, either consciously or subconsciously, to remain in Indochina. Staying in Cochinchina was not necessarily an obvious step; after all, his brother Ly Hieu So chose to return to Canton time and time again. For this reason, it seems appropriate to express Ly Dang's decision to remain as a commitment.

At its inauguration, the Kong-Cheong-Seng Company possessed a total capital of 240,000 piastres, a sum to which Ly Dang himself had contributed 96,000 piastres. In between his efforts to acquire the Cambodian cotton factory, Ly Dang directed the rest of his capital towards purchasing prime real estate and property in the city of Cholon. Ly Dang's business associates were not selected at random. Although some of the names are unfamiliar, at least one of his compatriots, Phung Nhut, went on to become the leader of the Cantonese *tongxianghui* in Cholon in the early 20th century. Phung Nhut, whose personal businesses are not as clearly delineated as Ly Dang, also appears in historical records as the president of Cholon's Chinese Chamber of Commerce in the mid-1910's, thus indicating his own prominence in the economic life of Cholon's Chinese community.²⁰⁰ By entering into partnership with these men, Ly Dang managed to combine the values of firm and network by taking his relationships with these respected Cantonese businessmen and coalescing them into a legally binding corporate form. In this instance we see that this Chinese corporation, wholly owned by Cholon Cantonese businessmen and sanctioned by the colonial administration, successfully used both networks and firms to get itself off of the ground.

²⁰⁰ *Nan Viet Zhonghua Zongshanghui: Wushi zhounian jinian kan* (Cholon: La Chambre de Commerce Chinoise du Sud-Vietnam, no date).

Although Ly Dang might not have realized it at the time, his decision to remain in Cochinchina was geographically significant as well. Ly Dang Senior's business expansions spread west along the Delta waterways to Chau Doc and then into Cambodia. Ly Dang the son continued this trend when he involved himself in the affairs of the Ksach Kandal cotton factory. This meant that in addition to the family's standard import-export trading in Phnom Penh, Ly Dang undertook a business whose foundation was production, necessitating a much greater involvement in the affairs of the region. No longer simply a wealthy shopkeeper or industrial tycoon, Ly Dang now had to work with raw materials, manual laborers, temperamental equipment, and the vicissitudes of the Cambodian agricultural system. Ly Dang's clientele dramatically changed from its original base of Chinese living abroad and indigenous people who wished to buy Chinese products.

Although the founding of this company indicates the importance of networks to Ly Dang's business, the operation of it required a hierarchical approach, the establishment of a firm. The implementation of corporate processes, specifically vertical integration from manufacture to purchasing, could not have been successfully undertaken without the presence of a formally established managerial hierarchy; however, the corporation really represented a more complex synthesis of both network and hierarchy. Marketing and distribution required access to the vast Cantonese trade networks stretching across East and Southeast Asia, an access which in turn assured the factory's ability to market its goods across Indochina and overseas to Japan.

Until his 1913 bankruptcy, his financial record suggests that Ly Dang managed to combine firm and network with great skill. In the years immediately following a series of financial missteps in 1902,²⁰¹ Ly Dang's businesses were successful across the board; however, his greatest success by far came from the cotton factory, which

²⁰¹ These missteps will be examined more closely later in this chapter.

thrived under his leadership. Venturing into business with his Cantonese compatriots gave Ly Dang access to a broader financial world by using the ever-reliable springboard of native place networks. Also, by consolidating his hold on the cotton factory, Ly Dang was arguably following in the footsteps of his father by operating a firm of his own within a larger native place network. Far from moving away from his reliance on the network value of his other investors, the Ksach-Kandal consolidation represents Ly Dang's apparently successful attempt to move up the hierarchy of the network to a place of greater regional prominence. In other words, rather than being content with his role as a two-bit player in the regional economy, Ly Dang positioned himself to become a leader whose prestige, both among colonial officials and back in Canton, offered him previously unimagined opportunities. This attempt succeeded admirably.

On the business front, Ly Dang surpassed the aspirations of his father by increasing on a grand scale the level at which the family business operated. In the late 19th-century, Ly Dang Senior began to branch out, seeking other avenues for profit in places like the Mekong Delta, Canton, and Cambodia, but he never really appears to have made that final critical step into getting involved with production and commodities that trade on an international scale. Ly Dang Senior had transportation and import-export shops; Ly Dang the son ventured into trade in commodities that were staples and necessities on an international level. His 1898 purchase of the Ksach Kandal cotton factory marks his first step into dealing in international commodities. He produced cotton, a global staple, and he intended it for sale overseas, understanding that the biggest market for his product was Japan. Ly Dang controlled and directed a lengthy production process involving spinning, weaving, packaging, selling, and shipping Cambodian cotton; his primary market was overseas. In this endeavor, Ly Dang departed from his early reliance upon native place networks to

establish a real firm requiring a formal managerial hierarchy to operate successfully. In other words, he used his networks as a springboard to develop firms with broad and diverse reach, in the process enhancing his own wealth and prestige within the network.

Ly Dang Jr. Ventures into Politics

Ly Dang's success in Indochina extended beyond typical business-related categories; the evidence suggests that Ly Dang was successful on the political front as well. In overseas Chinese society in general, wealth and property ownership served as a measure for social class and as an entrepôt into an entirely different lifestyle of leisure and plenty enjoyed only by the wealthiest echelons of the merchant class.²⁰² According to historian Yen Ching-hwang, who researches colonial Malaya, this wealth-based class distinction proved important not only within the Chinese community itself, but also to colonial authorities. He writes,

As wealth was an important prerequisite for Chinese community leadership, the wealthy capitalists were given leadership status, and those among them who were able, charitable, and with ambition would become leaders of the whole community. In the choice of leadership for the dialect and clan organizations, the wealthy were readily accepted as leaders because they commanded high status and prestige in society and were able to make substantial donations when required. To the British colonial government, merchants as a class were desirable and useful since they could directly contribute to the growth and prosperity of the colonies.²⁰³

This was not a phenomenon unique to British colonies; Chinese merchants in Indochina received preferential treatment at the hands of the French as well. As with most colonial phenomenon, this license proved to be double-edged. Colonial favor granted financial and authoritative benefits to certain members of the Chinese

²⁰² Yen, *Community and Politics*, 7-9.

²⁰³ Yen, *Community and Politics*, 9.

community, but colonial disfavor could be harsh and merciless. Chinese leaders were often held responsible for the misdeeds of the Chinese community at large, an accountability that occasionally brought a crushing economic burden to bear upon the “favored” Chinese merchant.

French police intelligence records verify that Ly Dang maintained an intimate involvement with the political affairs of the Chinese Republic and had relationships at the very highest levels. For example, in November 1912, Ly Dang received a telegram from the “Governor of Canton” himself,²⁰⁴ requesting that Ly Dang lead the effort to procure money from Cholon’s Cantonese community. The telegram requested this money for the purpose of helping China face the difficulties that had befallen her in conflicts with Russia over Mongolia. Ly Dang’s concern with an event happening in Mongolia, thousands of miles to the north of his own native place of Guangdong, serves as a reminder of the burgeoning nationalistic sentiments and loyalties felt by these overseas Chinese businessmen. This event also underscores Ly Dang’s prominence in the Chinese community. He personally organized a meeting to collect money for China’s cause, and that meeting occurred in the Cholon’s Cantonese Pagoda on Rue de Canton on November 24, 1912.²⁰⁵ According to the Sûreté report on the gathering, Ly Dang met with considerable success and collected substantial sums of money for the cause.

This prominence did not evolve solely as a result of Ly Dang’s prestige within Cholon’s Cantonese community. Many of the most prominent members of Chinese congregations were involved in secret society activities, and often, the upper echelon of overseas Chinese in Indochina enjoyed powerful roles in both the secret societies

²⁰⁴ The Sûreté report on this incident translates portions of the character code used for telegrams directly into French. The actual identity or government position of the “Governor of Canton” mentioned in the telegram remains a mystery.

²⁰⁵ Sûreté Letter N°14-bis, CAOM, INDO GGI 19223.

and the congregations with which they were affiliated. In these instances, congregation leaders wielded public and private authority that cemented their place in colonial, indigenous, and Chinese politics. Wealth and standing within a congregation often translated to prominence or even dominance of a Chinese secret society, granting depth as well as breadth to the authority wielded by a prominent individual. Ly Dang exemplifies this situation.

Before the 1911 Revolution, Ly Dang's reputation in Canton had been something less than honorable. In the spring of 1908, at the behest of the Viceroy of Canton,²⁰⁶ the Cochinchinese government initiated an investigation into the activities of Ly Dang and his brother Ly Hieu So, who had been accused of subversive activities by the Viceroy administering Canton.²⁰⁷ At the time of the investigation, Ly Dang sat on Cholon's city council, and enjoyed great respect in Cholon as a result of his business acumen, not to mention his general wealth and success. His brother, Ly Hieu So, despite having returned to Canton at the turn of the century, managed interests for or assisted in the business affairs of his brother at various times throughout Ly Dang's long career in Indochina. Both men were well known members of Cholon's Cantonese community who had free access to the perks and privileges of status within the congregation; however, despite the appearance of leading exemplary public lives, both men were inscribed upon the rolls of "Bao-Binh-An" a Chinese secret society.²⁰⁸ Ly Dang himself was alleged to be one of the major leaders of the secret society who had been responsible not only for instigating at least one major collective action, a boycott of American products in 1905, on behalf of the society, but also for enforcing

²⁰⁶ Literally translated from the French, "Viceroy of Canton" is a reference to another position within the Chinese provincial administration that is difficult to reliably identify.

²⁰⁷ Doc.1044, 9 September 1908, CAOM, INDO GGI 20072.

²⁰⁸ Letter No. 678 from the Chief Constable of the city of Cholon to the Central Police Superintendent in Saigon, 19 April 1908, CAOM, INDO GGI 20072.

the boycott within the local Chinese community.²⁰⁹ As a French investigator phrased it, Ly Dang and Ly Hieu So's "watchword was scrupulously observed because of the fear which they knew how to inspire through their continuing relations...with Chinese revolutionaries."²¹⁰ In fact, the political acumen of the two brothers eventually caused the Viceroy of Canton to request their formal extradition, a request denied by the French due to a lack of conclusive evidence. Not only were they among the top contributors to the revolutionary cause, but Ly Dang's prominence was such that he was rumored to have hosted Sun Yat-sen himself, known by his code name "Takano," either in Indochina or in his native Canton.²¹¹ Ly Dang's membership in a secret society afforded him significant political power, not only within his Cochinchinese community, but with Cantonese at large, and this power bloomed directly from the extensive Cantonese networks, both open and clandestine, that operated throughout Asia and beyond.

²⁰⁹ Police Report dated 4 May 1908, CAOM, INDO GGI 20072. The reasons for the boycott are never explicitly stated, but the timing of the Indochinese-based boycott, in 1905, combined with the fact that Ly Dang was Cantonese, suggests persuasively that this boycott occurred in protest of the 1904 renewal of the Sino-American Exclusion Treaty of 1894, which prohibited Chinese immigration into the United States. Anti-American protests and boycotts severely impacted U.S.-based business and commerce in China in general, but were particularly far-reaching in Guangdong, the province from which most Chinese immigrants to the United States hailed. The circumstances and details of this particular boycott are discussed at length in Edward Rhoads, *China's Republican Revolution: The Case of Kwangtung, 1895-1913* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), 83-90.

²¹⁰ Doc. 79c, 24 June 1908, CAOM, INDO GGI 20072. It seems safe to conclude, based on preceding sections of this letter, that the "revolutionaries" to which the Lieutenant Governor refers are, in fact, members of a secret society. In archival sources, members of secret societies are often counted as revolutionaries, a phenomenon which seems particularly appropriate in the case of the Chinese as so many of the Chinese secret societies in Indochina were devoted to overthrowing the Qing dynasty. As Ly Dang himself donated huge sums of money to both the revolutionary cause and later to the new Republic, and as he kept company with a number of prominent Chinese revolutionaries up to and including Sun Yat-sen, it is probably safe to assume that he was a member of a revolutionary secret society.

²¹¹ Note from Chief Constable dated April 7, 1908, CAOM, INDO GGI 20072.

Ly Dang's public role as a leader of Cholon's Chinese community goes without question. He donated to charitable causes, involved himself in the political affairs of China, sat on the city council, and managed a business empire that stretched across the Mekong Delta and reached from Canton to Cambodia. Although he never filled the office of congregational president, he did occupy other prominent leadership roles in Cochinchina, and he also possessed significant authority within his congregation. He demonstrated this authority in numerous ways, not the least of which was his ability to call meetings of all Cantonese congregation members whenever he felt it warranted by local or international events.²¹² Unfortunately, colonial life was fraught with risk. After 1909, his cotton business fell into a steep decline from which Ly Dang found himself unable to recover. Despite his prominence and stature, in the end, he lost everything he had.

Ly Dang Jr.'s Sinking Fortunes

Emboldened by his success in the cotton and real estate markets, in 1900, Ly Dang turned his attention towards a new project. Creating yet another business, the Kong-Chai-Yun Company, Ly Dang worked to gain entry into the lucrative Indochinese salt trade. Around 1900, the French Colonial Government auctioned off a contract guaranteeing the right of exploitation for the salt of Cochinchina to a Frenchman named Canavaggio. Ly Dang hoped to control the transportation and distribution of Cochinchinese salt by entering into an exclusive contract between Mr. Canavaggio and the new company, Kong-Chai-Yun. In order to accumulate the capital necessary to support his bold plan, Ly Dang was forced to rely upon his

²¹² CAOM, INDO GGI 19223; CAOM, INDO GGI 20072. In the case of Indochina, the most wealthy or powerful members of a congregation often abstained from the office of congregation president in favor of less powerful – though still prominent – members of the congregation. In practice, this meant that the president might have to answer to higher authorities within his own congregation, a situation clearly not anticipated by the French administration when conceiving of the presidential office.

brother, Ly Hieu So. Ly Dang offered up 50,000 piastres of his own money to the Kong-Chai-Yun Company, while Ly Hieu So, acquiring loans on behalf of his brother based upon the resources of his own firms in Canton and Hong Kong, provided an additional 300,000 piastres to support his brother's scheme. The following photographs give us some insight into the mechanics of salt mining in early 20th century Indochina. In particular, the exhibited methods of transporting salt by hand reveal the labor- and time-intensive nature of the task.

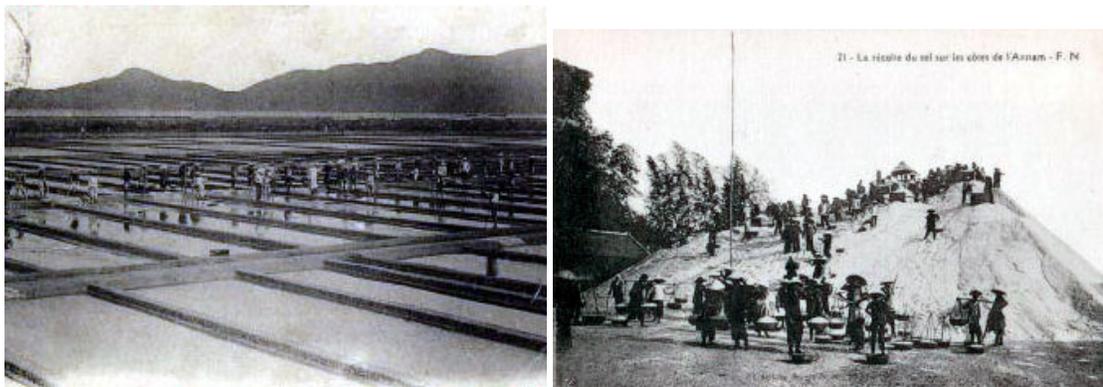


Figure 8 Salt mining²¹³

Although Ly Dang's plan seemed initially promising, two unfortunate circumstances conspired against his success. First, the French Colonial Government increased the tax on salt by \$.10 per 100 kilograms, greatly impacting the profits of the Kong-Chai-Yun Company. More disastrously, within two years of committing his money to Canavaggio, the French colonial authority cancelled the Frenchman's contract, leaving Ly Dang and Ly Hieu So in dire financial straits. Ly Dang's foray into the Cochinchina salt industry showed an even higher degree of involvement with European interests than the cotton factory because in this case, Ly Dang entered into a formal contract with Canavaggio, the French owner of the salt concession. A contract by nature implies hierarchy, the formality of firm as opposed to network. The salt

²¹³ <http://www.postcardman.net/salt.html>. Feb 12, 2006. <http://www.postcardman.net/salt.html>. Feb 12, 2006.

concession points to the most glaring weakness of any of Ly Dang's endeavors. What the colonial government gave, it could easily take away, rendering both firms and networks impotent in the face of colonial might – or just colonial capriciousness.

Altogether, the Cochinchina salt disaster resulted in a loss of 290,000 piastres for Ly Dang, a significant sum of money that had catastrophic consequences for the family's interests in Asia. Ly Hieu So's Canton-based company, Kong Foc Long, had provided the lion's share of the money for the salt venture as a loan. When the news of the Kong Chai Yun Company's collapse reached the business managers of the Kong Foc Long Company, the managers understood that this signaled financial ruin for them as well and they fled, embezzling 85,000 piastres from the crippled firm as they departed and plunging the brothers even further into debt.

By the close of 1902, Ly Dang and Ly Hieu So faced financial liabilities in the amount of 470,000 piastres. They narrowly escaped total ruin by making special arrangements with their creditors to extend the time allowed to repay the money they owed. One can only assume that native place connections and loyalty provided a haven for the two brothers as they sought to repay their massive liabilities. The bankruptcy report specifically says that Ly Dang's creditors made a special arrangement with him whereby he would receive an extension of the time allowable for the repayment of his loans.²¹⁴ As the report also implies that Ly Dang borrowed significant sums of cash from companies and interests in Canton and Hong Kong, it

²¹⁴ Although it is never explicit in the documents, I believe that the extension Ly Dang received allowed for repayment over the course of ten years. This seems like the most logical time frame for repayment for two reasons: first, that Ly Dang's eventual bankruptcy occurred just under ten years from the time of his disaster with the Cochinchinese salt enterprise, and second, because at the time of that bankruptcy, he had nearly paid off the original loans in their entirety, lacking only 10,000 piastres to free himself from debt. Unfortunately, liabilities from his Cambodian cotton factory combined with his inability to complete payments on his original debt, forcing him into default on payments that amounted to what we can only assume to be hundreds of thousands of *piastres*, as the liquidation of all of his assets, including both goods and properties, was insufficient to keep him from insolvency.

seems reasonable to assume that these companies, perhaps feeling a generosity towards Ly Dang inspired by the ties between them (network), allowed him time and freedom to recoup his losses and defend his good name. Inevitably, this generosity contains an element of self-interest because any firm would choose to recoup what it could from a bad loan rather than lose the whole amount, but the fact remains that Ly Dang's creditors offered him an extension as opposed to a stint in debtor's prison. To that end, the two brothers undertook a major restructuring of the family's assets.

Ly Hieu So closed his businesses in Canton and Hong Kong and moved back to Cochinchina, where he took over the task of managing the Ksach-Kandal cotton factory. He remained in this position for three years until he decided to move back to China once more. Upon deciding to return home, Ly Hieu So and his brother reached some sort of private agreement whereby Ly Dang would become the sole owner of all of the family's interests in Cochinchina. In addition to liquidating his business assets, Ly Hieu So sold much of the property he owned in China, allowing him to pay off his share of the debt, an amount totaling 30,000 piastres. After settling their business affairs, Ly Hieu So moved back to China where he became a physician, establishing his own medical practice which was still operational at the time of his brother's 1913 bankruptcy. As for Ly Dang, he remained responsible for paying back 440,000 piastres to his creditors.

The debacle of the Kong Chai Yun Company's salt venture illuminates both the strengths and weaknesses of the Ly family enterprise. The brothers diversified their investments and interests by establishing a number of different firms that were not only based in different cities, but also pursued entirely different businesses; however, the ever-present problem of capital remained. To solve this particular difficulty, one company lent money to another, thus creating one of Ly Dang's most serious financial Achilles' heels. By having one firm lend money to another, Ly Dang

and his brother tied the lending firm to the borrowing firm's fate. If, as in the case of the salt venture, the borrowing firm collapsed, the lending firm was quite likely to follow the borrowing firm into bankruptcy. In the case of the Kong Chai Yun Company, this flaw proved even more disastrous because of the nature of the lender. Kong Foc Long, the lending firm, belonged to Ly Hieu So, who offered the staggering sum of 300,000 piastres to his brother. In this case, the relationship extended far beyond particularistic ties into actual kinship, the loyalty of a younger brother to his elder brother. No doubt, this relationship increased both firms' potential liabilities. As for the question of why they bothered to have separate firms in the first place, it seems likely that different partnerships also had different strengths and weaknesses. After all, in Ly Dang's initial involvement with the Kong-Cheong-Seng Society, the investors agreed upon the specific goal of purchasing a cotton factory. Logically, what better place would there be for firms to get capital than from other firms in the group?²¹⁵

In 1903, the rest of Ly Dang's businesses in Indochina were working quite smoothly. He borrowed 96,000 piastres which he used to purchase the shares of three of his business partners in the Ksach-Kandal cotton factory enterprise. His remaining partner, Nam Hee Emile, retained a share of the cotton factory until 1905, when Ly Dang paid 48,000 piastres to buy out Nam Hee Emile's ownership as well. From April 1905, Ly Dang became the sole proprietor of the Ksach Kandal cotton factory. The reorganization of Ly Dang's financial affairs suggests a reorientation of the balance between firm and network in his corporate dealings. By slowly buying out his partners and consolidating his hold over the Kong-Cheong-Seng company, Ly Dang appeared to move away from the network and toward hierarchy; however, this move

²¹⁵ Ly Dang's financial track record suggests that he did not eschew the use of banks; however, his liability with the Bank of Indochina at the time of his bankruptcy was such that he likely found himself unable to borrow significant sums of capital from any source outside of his network.

to financial independence does not necessarily mean that Ly Dang disparaged the value and usefulness of his networks in general.

Beginning in 1910, Ly Dang once again faced calamitous circumstances beyond his control. The Ksach Kandal cotton factory enjoyed one primary market for its cloth: Japan. When business was good, the Japanese market served Ly Dang quite well but disaster struck in 1910 when strikes and anti-Japanese boycotts led by the Chinese raged across Indochina and the other nations of Southeast Asia. The Chinese boycotted Japanese goods and the Japanese returned the favor, refusing to purchase any goods made in China or by Chinese interests elsewhere. While this boycott had serious consequences throughout the region, it proved disastrous for the Ksach Kandal Cotton factory because, at that time, Cambodian cottons were sold almost exclusively on the Japanese market. As a result of these boycotts, the factory operated 50,000 piastres in the red for the year 1910.

The Japanese boycott was the first hit in a series of blows that devastated the Cambodian cotton mill and ultimately caused Ly Dang's bankruptcy. Circumstances did not improve for Ly Dang in 1911 when abnormal rains fell much earlier in the year than expected, completely annihilating Cambodia's entire cotton crop. Ly Dang, like most participants in agriculturally based industries, had already dedicated to other projects a portion of the money he expected to earn during the 1911 season. This situation left him with an additional 107,000 piastres loss by the end of that year.

His 1911 debt signaled the beginning of the end for Ly Dang's business ventures. As his losses increased, his available credit decreased, and his attempts to raise private funds to sustain the factory were hampered when he defaulted on promised purchases and deliveries. In the end, he was forced to take out loans and advances on property and goods already mortgaged to the full extent of their value. As a result, interest payments combined with regular payments on loans to equal an

amount so great that it covered all of his assets completely, effectively crippling Ly Dang's financial empire. A better harvest in 1912 resulted in a profit of around 80,000 piastres for the Ksach-Kandal cotton factory; unfortunately, this amount was insufficient even to cover the interest that Ly Dang owed to his creditors. Throughout the 1912 season, Ly Dang struggled to find a solution to the mounting catastrophe but he was eventually forced to acknowledge the inevitable. Chased by creditors and plagued by payments he had no chance of making, Ly Dang formally declared bankruptcy in May 1913.²¹⁶

Over a nine-year period extending from 1903 to 1913, Ly Dang had managed to repay 430,000 piastres of his 440,000 piastres debt. By his 1913 bankruptcy, he had only failed to repay 10,000 piastres of the original money he had lost during the Cochinchina salt disaster.²¹⁷ Unfortunately, his total financial situation was much more serious. In order to recoup his original debt as quickly as possible, Ly Dang had borrowed even more money in order to have capital to use in his assorted business ventures. In a letter to the Governor General written on May 19, 1913, Indochina's Prosecutor General estimated that Ly Dang's financial liabilities exceeded one million piastres. He owed the bulk of that money to two different creditors: 600,000 piastres to the Bank of Indochina, and another 80,000 piastres to the Chinese manager of the cotton factories of Haiphong and Nam Dinh.²¹⁸ The Bankruptcy Tribunal estimated his total debt at 1,360,000 piastres, and although he possessed assets totaling 1.112.000 piastres, approximately 600,000 piastres of those assets were guaranteed by mortgages held in Saigon and in Phnom Penh. The Bank of Indochina also claimed

²¹⁶ Telegram N°79-C, CAOM, INDO GGI 19223

²¹⁷ Mémoire Sommaire, CAOM, INDO GGI 19223.

²¹⁸ Letter N°236. CAOM, INDO GGI 19223.

that large sums of Ly Dang's available capital had been sent back to China in the form of donations intended to help the new Republic.²¹⁹

The course of Ly Dang's bankruptcy sheds a bit of light on the issue of firm versus network in his financial life. The tremendous debt owed to the Bank of Indochina evidences a more corporate leaning, suggesting that Ly Dang adhered to a formal, more Western hierarchical structure and even interacted with western colonial entities in his quest for profit. On the other hand, the hefty sum Ly Dang owed to the Cantonese cotton firms in Haiphong and Nam Đinh shows that he had not abandoned his reliance on regional Cantonese networks. The importance of networks finds further emphasis in the assertion that Ly Dang remitted considerable donations to the new Chinese Republic. The critical point to understand when dealing with Cochinchina's Cantonese networks is that networks were both economic and *political*. Economic power required political power, and vice versa, a situation further complicated by the fact that neither economic nor political power were attainable in French Indochina without some cooperation with the colonial government. In view of Ly Dang's burgeoning influence and growing status in Cholon's Chinese community, Ly Dang's frequently alternating reliance upon firm and network becomes much more understandable.

In terms of Ly Dang's bankruptcy, another type of hierarchy assumed a central role in the dissolution of his corporate interests: the French colonial government. Using the Government of Cochinchina's administrative hierarchy, the French investigated Ly Dang's liabilities and the reasons underlying his financial collapse. They interviewed his creditors and, through the courts, arranged the dismantling and sale of his empire. The colonial administrative hierarchy was, in all respects, far more formal and rigidly structured than the Cantonese networks that typically competed but

²¹⁹ Letter N°152-C, CAOM, INDO GGI 19223.

occasionally cooperated with it. While personal connections in both Indochina and in France contributed significantly to a French colon's success in the colony, individual rank within a meticulously organized and hierarchical system of agencies and organizations largely defined one's power in the colony. This same pyramid of administrative authority formally defined the procedures to be followed by the administrative hierarchy in the event of any number of political or economic occurrences, including Ly Dang's bankruptcy. Although this hierarchy was patently colonial rather than Chinese, it still played the most significant role in managing Ly Dang's collapse.

Cholon's Chinese Community Rallies Around Ly Dang

The very colonial government responsible for many of the vicissitudes of Ly Dang's financial empire also oversaw its dissolution. The French administration quickly appointed a bankruptcy manager to see to the sale or auction of all of Ly Dang's property, goods, and merchandise, but Cholon's Chinese networks supported Ly Dang until the very end. Bales of cotton in storage in Cambodia sold quite easily to French buyers but when the French administration attempted to liquidate Ly Dang's property in Cholon, they ran into difficulties. The circumstances of Ly Dang's bankruptcy were subject to review by a French tribunal attached to Saigon's commercial court. During the investigation, Ly Dang was imprisoned for an indefinite length of time pending the court's final judgment. When the agent responsible for liquidating the contents of Ly Dang's Cholon properties approached the Chinese community looking for buyers, he met with little success. "Having anticipated that several of Cholon's storekeepers would be likely to [buy the contents of Ly Dang's shops], they did not want to make us offers, fearing, no doubt, the difficulties and the

cost [associated with] the bankruptcy and with Ly Dang's incarceration."²²⁰ The agent in charge, A.F. Decoly, goes on to say that they have not given up hope of finding a buyer willing to purchase the goods before they go to auction. He insists that if the French are forced to sell the goods at auction, they will not recoup enough of their value, adding that he "has it on good authority that [an auction] would be boycotted by Chinese buyers."²²¹ This interesting conclusion to the agent's letter reinforces Ly Dang's prominence within the higher circles of Cholon's Chinese community. It also reveals a tantalizing hint of the solidarity of Cholon's Chinese population by highlighting their unwillingness to take unfair advantage of one of their own.

While Ly Dang's story has frequently shown the weakness of the network in terms of its competitiveness on an international scale, the final disposition of his property shines as a premier example of the loyalty of Cholon's Cantonese community at large. Ly Dang found some moral support in his Cochinchinese community, which refused to purchase from the French the goods sitting on the shelves of Ly Dang's shops and warehouses. Other reasons could exist for the refusal of the Chinese community to profit from Ly Dang's misfortune; however, it would be very difficult to say that the small-scale boycott offered up by Cholon's Chinese community showed no solidarity with the unfortunate, imprisoned Ly Dang.²²² In fact, the consistency of the boycott suggests that Cholon's Cantonese community enjoyed access to a broad reaching network that was at least semi-structured, if not formally established. Catalyzing and enforcing a citywide boycott required complicated planning and logistics suggestive of a network that not only extended broadly across the fields and

²²⁰ The Mémoire Sommaire, attached to document N°340, p. 4, CAOM, INDO GGI 19223.

²²¹ The Mémoire Sommaire, attached to document N°340, p. 4, CAOM, INDO GGI 19223.

²²² Ly Dang's imprisonment seems to have been a main point of contention between the French administration and the overseas Chinese community and appears to have been in large part responsible for the unwillingness of Cholon's Chinese community to profit from Ly Dang's bankruptcy.

professions of Cantonese Cholon, but also reached deeply into the community to touch Cantonese from every walk of life.

Curiously, some speculation circulated about the true nature of Ly Dang's pecuniary collapse. The French subjected Ly Dang and Ly Hieu So to numerous investigations, particularly after the collapse of their empire due to bankruptcy in 1913, when it was alleged that the two men had possibly falsified the bankruptcy in order to avoid repaying their creditors.²²³ Ly Dang's involvement in the Bao-Binh-An society stood as the cornerstone of these allegations. French investigations identified many discrepancies in Ly Dang's financial past, but formal secret society association was never proven, and the French, in part because of Ly Dang's extremely high profile in Cholon and Saigon, eventually allowed the brothers to continue on their way;²²⁴ however, regardless of the bankruptcy's legitimacy, there was little doubt that the two Ly's had engaged in rather underhanded activities, strongly indicating their attachment to some form of clandestine organization. Perhaps this explains the limits to the solidarity shown by Cholon businessmen. They refused en masse to participate in the dismantling of Ly Dang's empire, but local networks did not extend far enough to intercede by lending him money and stopping the dismantling in the first place;

²²³ Note from Cholon's Chief Constable to the Lt. Governor of Cochinchine dated 1 April 1908, CAOM, INDO GGI 20072.

²²⁴ In fact, Ly Dang had a close relationship with Drouhet, the mayor of Cholon, who stood up for him on numerous occasions when investigators accused Ly Dang of improprieties. Drouhet was, perhaps, the most famous mayor of Cholon. Essentially, he presided over the construction of the city, was beloved by the city's Chinese community, personally muscled through all manner of public works including public hospitals, and enjoyed near-hero status in his domain. It is difficult to say whether or not Drouhet came to a practical acceptance of the fact that Ly Dang's many contributions to charitable causes in the city outweighed any potential criminality he might have pursued, but Drouhet's intervention definitely helped Ly Dang avoid the clutches of Cochinchinese investigators. Letter dated June 24, 1908 from the Lt Governor of Cochinchina p. i. to the Governor General of Indochine, CAOM, INDO GGI 20072.

however, if Ly Dang's bankruptcy were, in fact, illegitimate, the apparent non-responsiveness of the Chinese community takes on a different meaning.

Coincidentally, Ly Dang's bankruptcy and the 1930's collapse of Singapore icon Tan Kah Kee parallel one another in a number of striking ways. Both individuals were successful businessmen who raised enormous sums for political causes back in China. Both also suffered through bankruptcies that some speculated were less than genuine. In truth, with the passage of nearly 100 years, it is impossible to verify Ly Dang's bankruptcy, leaving us only with speculation. That being the case, this paper operates under the assumption that Ly Dang's financial collapse was genuine, as were the causes leading to it. This is the only position for which we have considerable documentary verification.

Conclusion

Scholars of business in China typically couch their arguments in terms of hierarchies or firms, which are considered "Western" by nature, and networks, which are considered "Chinese" by nature; however, how do these notions apply to overseas Chinese business in Southeast Asia? In his book Encountering Chinese Networks, historian Sherman Cochran problematizes these categories, writing, "By drawing a seemingly timeless distinction between Western businesses with hierarchies and Chinese businesses with networks, they have run the risk of essentializing Western and Chinese businesses...it does not allow for the possibility that a corporation (regardless of whether it was owned by Westerners, Japanese, or Chinese) learned to deal with and make use of both hierarchies and networks."²²⁵ Using Cochran's statement as a point of departure, the goal of this chapter has been to examine the notions of firm and network as they operated in French Indochina at the turn of the

²²⁵ Sherman Cochran, *Encountering Chinese Networks: Western, Japanese, and Chinese Corporations in China, 1880-1937* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 6.

19th century by taking a closer look at the life and businesses of the Cantonese merchant, Ly Dang.

Some China specialists have suggested that Chinese merchants managed to stay in control of local business arrangements regardless of the authority imposed upon them by Western corporate hierarchies. As Sherman Cochran summarizes, “Never, they have maintained, did western (and other non-Chinese) corporations in China wrest control over marketing from Chinese merchants at any time during this period.”²²⁶ While writings from scholars such as Rhoads Murphey, Hao Yen-p’ing, and Dwight Perkins might support this claim as it relates to private Western firms, the question takes on new shades of meaning when applied to Indochina, where, in some cases, the line between “corporate” and “colonial” did not exist at all. This begs the question, how did Chinese businessmen and networks persevere in the face of colonial pressure, whether legal, political, or economic?

The endurance and success of Cantonese entrepreneurship depended largely upon the deep roots the Cantonese community had across the region, with other urban Cantonese, local and regional colonial authorities, and even Chinese and French administrators on the international level. These roots existed in the form of a three-part pyramid of networks and hierarchies encompassing everything from a friendship between two Cantonese shopkeepers in the rural Mekong Delta to a community’s ability to engage on its behalf the authority of the Chinese Consul in France. The pyramid consisted of informal Cantonese networks, Cantonese networks and hierarchies that mediated with French Authorities, and networks and hierarchies under French Colonial rule.

Informal Cantonese networks served as the first and most basic building blocks of an overseas Chinese business empire in Indochina. Without the basic relationships

²²⁶ Cochran, *Encountering Chinese Networks*, 7.

formed between local businessmen in Indochina, relatives or acquaintances from back in Canton, and the partnerships that emerged as a result, the quest for financial glory would have been doomed from the start. In Ly Dang's case, he maintained the network-based components of his business by cultivating close connections with his native place, a relationship forged by his father in the previous century and kept alive for a number of years by the personal and fiduciary investments of his brother, Ly Hieu So, in the cities of Canton and Hong Kong.

Ly Dang continued his reliance upon native place connections and informal networks when he encouraged the growth of his financial empire across Indochina, owning businesses or being invested in companies that stretched across Cochinchina along the major waterways west into Cambodia as well. While his father, Ly Dang Senior, began this process of diversification, Ly Dang himself continued it by acquiring shares in new industries and companies whenever he felt inclined; however, Ly Dang extended his own business network far beyond the traditional import and export services established by his father. Much of this expansion, as in the case of the Kong-Cheong-Seng Society which allowed Ly Dang to purchase the Ksach-Kandal cotton factory, developed through Ly Dang's association with Cholon's Cantonese congregation and by means of the relationships he developed there. In these ways, although he was exceptionally successful, Ly Dang typifies the overseas Chinese businessman in Indochina. He took full advantage of accessible local and native-place networks and used them as the springboard to make his fortune.

Although informal Chinese networks remained quite discrete, Chinese interaction with French authorities did occur. Formal Cantonese networks and hierarchies mediated with French authorities when necessary to protect individual Chinese businessmen or the Chinese community as a whole. Typically, this mediation occurred under the auspices of the congregation, which was the organization

responsible for initiating and enforcing the boycott on Ly Dang's repossessed goods at the end of his Indochinese business career. Important congrégation members often held significant positions in local, French-created civic government,²²⁷ thus giving them greater leverage when conflicts emerged. Congrégations maintained their roles as the 19th century flagships of Sino-French mediation in Indochina, and not until the 1920's did Chinese Chambers of Commerce begin to usurp congrégational authority.

Hierarchies under French Colonial rule also played substantial roles in overseas Chinese business life. Ly Dang consistently tried to broaden the scope and range of his businesses, stalwartly branching out into regions and trades he sought to control to his benefit. This branching out forced Ly Dang into a position of great vulnerability. Political conflict, natural disaster, and fickle colonial administrations possessed a great capacity to damage or destroy Ly Dang's carefully devised plans. This vulnerability to events occurring in nations across the globe proves that Ly Dang undertook a process of internationalization with his businesses, but it also reveals the immense fragility of his empire, which, despite the deep roots Ly Dang possessed in informal Chinese networks and even Chinese organizations capable of mediating with the French, could be destroyed by flood, treachery, or the indifferent French colons.

Kinship and particularistic ties within overseas Chinese business endeavors maintained an enduring importance that colonial authority could not overshadow; however, the French colonial government possessed the authority to severely restrict the effectiveness of local business ventures, which, on a case by case basis, essentially limited Chinese networks to the realm of personal significance (whether personal relationships or personal finances) as opposed to corporate; however, despite these colonial limitations, Ly Dang's career seems to have followed the pattern first suggested by Cochran at the beginning of this chapter. Ly Dang achieved his financial

²²⁷ Such as Ly Dang's position on Cholon's city council.

success because, using Cochran's words, he "learned to deal with and make use of both hierarchies and networks."²²⁸ Operating a French salt concession or running an international cotton factory in Cambodia required the cooperation of French authorities. When that cooperation was withdrawn, as in the case of the salt concession, financial catastrophe resulted. On the other hand, successfully utilizing both business models proved to be a bit of a sticky wicket; in fact, in this regard, Ly Dang's ultimate failure seems to have arisen as a direct result of his inability to compensate for the weaknesses of these two business styles, or to meld them together seamlessly within a colonial context.

²²⁸ Cochran, *Encountering Chinese Networks*, 6.

CHAPTER 5: OUR BROTHERS' KEEPERS: MUTUAL AID IN THE CONGREGATIONS

Like the *huiguan* and *gongsuo* that predated them, *Congrégations* fulfilled a number of vitally important functions for the communities in which they were located. Far more than simple guilds meant to encourage business and stimulate trade, Chinese *congrégations* existed as the keystones of Indochina's overseas Chinese communities, governing, or at the very least taking a hand in, every aspect of overseas Chinese life. Thematically, the roles and responsibilities of the *congrégations* fall into three basic categories: social and cultural responsibilities, political and governance responsibilities from the Chinese perspective, and responsibilities required of the Chinese community by the French administration. Though they represent a convenient way of approaching the many functions undertaken by Chinese *congrégations*, in actual fact, these categories were far from discrete. The spheres of responsibility for fulfilling social, cultural, and political functions within a *congrégation* often overlapped and large areas of contested responsibility existed, especially with regard to French demands on the resources and leadership of the large urban *congrégations*.

Overseas Chinese lived lives fraught with danger and uncertainty. The natural disasters that destroyed crops and leveled factories also took lives, and in the Indochinese wilderness, injury, plague, and death were always lurking just around the corner. For Chinese expatriates who had left their native places in search of profit, fortune was a fickle friend. Despite the proximity to China, many overseas Chinese never made it back to the villages they called home. Even for those who survived colonial life, financial misfortune could strike unexpectedly. No one could predict when bankruptcy or illness, fire or death, might leave an individual in desperate need of material assistance. In these times, Chinese *congrégations* assumed their mutual aid

functions, acting as social insurance for their members abroad. While these charitable functions are interesting in their own right, the anecdotes emerging from these roles also give us insight into areas of cooperation and conflict between the overseas Chinese and the French. Congregations participated in local and international disaster relief, supported congregational hospitals, and dealt with all of the issues surrounding death, including cemetery operation, burial, and the repatriation of bones. These are their stories.

Poverty Relief and Local Disaster Relief

While congregations concerned themselves with events back in China, they also provided relief to victims of “backyard” disasters. Floods and epidemics were commonplace, but even more frequent and frightening were the fires that raged across Cholon’s quays on a regular basis. The French admiralty commented upon these horrific events as early as March 13, 1867, when the Captain in charge of Cholon’s military forces reported a blaze at 3:45 in the morning on the Quai de Mytho that was shocking in its intensity. “Indeed, flames of considerable height rose in the air and cast upon the city a light that would have made one suppose that a whole district was on fire.”²²⁹ A similar fire occurred in 1868, and in 1907, in a mere 17 day span, two different fires killed or wounded dozens of Chinese and Vietnamese and destroyed 2 companies, causing in excess of 700,000 francs in damage.²³⁰

In these types of situations, whether they affected the congregation specifically or the Chinese community at large, congregations often intervened to help their countrymen in need. Most often, this assistance came in the form of donated goods or community fundraising, but occasionally they contributed labor or services as well. In

²²⁹ Military Commander of Cholon to Commandant of Troops in CochinChina, 13 March 1867, CAOM, INDO GGI 12697.

²³⁰ Lieutenant governor to Governor general, 15 March 1907 & 2 April 1907, CAOM, INDO GGI 17642.

the dead of night on the 14/15 of February 1879, a fire exploded behind the brick houses on the Quai de Binh Cay. Sixteen brick sheds²³¹ were destroyed, but the quick action of the congregations saved the many residences in the area. Although all of the congregations arrived with their pumps to combat the blaze, the Phuoc Kien congregation received high praise for arriving the earliest and, therefore, doing the most good at the scene.²³²

International Disaster Relief

Responsibilities of the congregation extended well beyond events in the cities, or even the countries, in which the congregations were based. The status of a congregation depended not only upon its political and economic equity in its adopted country, but also upon the way in which people from the congregation's native place viewed the organization. Wealthy overseas Chinese individuals enhanced the prestige of a congregation by pursuing such tasks as building schools or large houses in their hometowns,²³³ but the surest way to foster goodwill in one's native place was to rise to the occasion during times of need. Remittances catalyzed by disaster were considered acts of necessity more than generosity, and were used to alleviate grim conditions caused by plagues, famine, flooding, or other unpredictable catastrophes.

In 1902 and 1903, a famine in Canton stirred the Cantonese congregations of Saigon and Cholon to action to alleviate the suffering of their brethren. This famine occurred as a result of sudden increase in rice prices, leaving many poor Cantonese in

²³¹ By this, I mean huts made of straw that were used to house bricks.

²³² Administrator of Cholon's Weekly Report, 15 February 1879, CAOM, INDO GGI 10588.

²³³ For example, historian Madeline Hsu tells the story of a Cantonese businessman who, upon making his fortune on the west coast of the United States, returns to his native county to build seven identical townhouses, all in a row, for his seven wives in China. Madeline Hsu, *Dreaming of Gold, Dreaming of Home: Transnationalism and migration Between the United States and South China, 1882-1943* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000).

dire straits.²³⁴ These efforts of the Cantonese community were led by six prominent Chinese, including Phung Nhut, at the time a city councilor who would eventually become president of Cholon's Cantonese Congregation and of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce.²³⁵ The Cantonese requested and received permission from the Lieutenant Governor to start up a fund based on collections received from Cantonese donors throughout the metropole "in order to help our fellow countrymen."²³⁶ This petition is particularly interesting because of the light it sheds upon intra-Cantonese competition in the Nanyang, as well as upon the awareness had by the Cantonese of colonial rivalry. After explaining the dire situation in Canton and requesting permission to take up a collection for relief, the petitioners add, "We have the honor to send you the present request to obtain permission to open said subscription in Cholon and Saigon, following the example of what has been done in Singapore, in Penang, and in the Malay States."²³⁷

First, the fact that the Cantonese mentioned the similar subscriptions already underway in the Malay Peninsula suggests that they keenly felt the need to jump on the native place bandwagon to avoid being completely overshadowed by *huiguan* in other places. There can be little doubt that the Cantonese community in Singapore commanded greater respect and authority back in Guangdong than did the Indochinese Cantonese congregations. The same is probably true for the combined influence of the

²³⁴ Letter from the Mayor of Cholon to the Lieutenant Governor, 17 Octobre 1902, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.8/082(6).

²³⁵ Other prominent Cantonese signing the petition included Tchang Hsueh Lin, Han K'un, Wang Hsieh Hieu, and Lin Wen Chu (I found at least two of the signatures on the petition to be illegible). Petition from Cantonese Community to the Lieutenant Governor, 30 Mars 1903, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.8/082(6).

²³⁶ Petition from Cantonese Community to the Lieutenant Governor, 30 Mars 1903, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.8/082(6).

²³⁷ Petition from Cantonese Community to the Lieutenant Governor, 30 Mars 1903, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.8/082(6).

Malayan *huiguan* versus those of the Indochinese Cantonese; however, that does not mean that Indochina's congregations, and specifically the congregations in Cochinchina, were insignificant. As this dissertation has already demonstrated, they held significant corporate and real estate assets in Guangdong and in Hong Kong, not to mention the influence they were occasionally able to wield with French authorities, an influence Cantonese living in British ruled areas were clearly unable to match. It is not surprising, therefore, that Cochinchina's Cantonese felt a bit of competition with their Malayan counterparts and worked hard to be taken seriously, both in their native counties and among their brethren based in different overseas locales.

Secondly, this final appeal shows great sophistication in terms of the manner in which it approached the Cochinchinese administration. While the French showed no indication of wanting to deny this request, in general, any appeal brought to the French could be a bit of a crapshoot. While colonial authorities nearly always upheld colonial law, interpretations varied widely, and permission was often withheld based on technicalities that had more to do with colonial capriciousness or paranoia than with any particular aspect of Indochinese legislation. That being said, French sensitivity with regard to the success of the British in Asia knew few bounds.²³⁸ If the British felt secure enough to allow such a subscription to occur, and to seem compassionate and beneficent in the process, then what possible reasons could the French devise for refusing to do so?

Of course, Cantonese efforts to help their brethren were also occasionally appreciated by the colons. In 1907, Cantonese businessmen in Cholon, again faced with severe famine in the native place, "decided to donate 100 tons of rice to the

²³⁸ This sensitivity, its origins, and history have been amply documented in Cady, *The Roots of French Imperialism*.

French hospital in Canton for free distribution to the sick and needy.”²³⁹ The French Consul quickly telegraphed his thanks for the gift and asked that his gratitude be conveyed to the donating Chinese;²⁴⁰ however, gifts in colonial times occasionally met with logistical hurdles and this particular remittance was no exception. At that time, due to vagaries in the international market, rice was cheaper in Hong Kong than it was in Saigon. In the end, the Cantonese businessmen chose to send 2000 piastres to the French Consul in Canton with a letter asking him to use the money to buy the same amount of rice that Cholon’s Cantonese originally had intended to ship to their compatriots.²⁴¹

In fact, in 1935, charitable activities undertaken by the Chinese community received a valuable boost with the efforts to create an official committee intended to oversee and organize the aid and relief efforts administered by CochinChina’s Chinese. The General Committee to Aid the Victims of China was led by a 13 member commission consisting of two members each of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce, the Sept-Pagodes, the Dietary Limitation Committee, the General Committee of the KMT in Indochina, the General Syndicate of Chinese Workers, and the Chinese School Union, plus one representative of the Chinese press.²⁴² The Dietary Limitation Committee first proposed the establishment this charitable board, and under the patronage of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce, it was quickly inaugurated, in part to help aid the victims of the terrible floods that swept China in 1935. This disaster is particularly interesting from the standpoint of the organization of Indochina’s Chinese

²³⁹ Telegram N°378 from the Governor general to the French Consul in Canton, 28 April 1907, CAOM, INDO GGI 20310.

²⁴⁰ Telegram N°4 from the Consul of France in Hong Kong to the Governor General, 1 May 1907, CAOM, INDO GGI 20310.

²⁴¹ Telegrams N°s 629 & 630 from the Governor General to the French Consul in Canton, 18-19 June 1907, CAOM, INDO GGI 20310.

²⁴² Note N°4110 from the Governor of CochinChina, 9 August 1935, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IIA.45/215(E.111).

community because while 10,000 piastres were to be sent to aid the victims, more than half of that sum was to be taken from the funds held in reserve for the Dietary Limitation Committee in an account in Hong Kong.²⁴³

During the Sino-Japanese War, charitable remittances increased significantly in frequency and scale. Small fund-raising efforts occurred year round in the overseas Chinese community, especially around the anniversaries of tragic days or events in Chinese history. In 1938, when flooding on the Yellow River again devastated northern China, the Chinese Association of Egg Merchants raised 4000 piastres to help the flood victims. Also in 1938, the Chinese Consul in Hanoi began soliciting funds to use to purchase cholera vaccines to help with the epidemics raging through China. His efforts raised 30,000 piastres for the cause.²⁴⁴ The boost given to charitable participation in Indochina's Chinese community during the war was doubtless due more to the increased politicization of the community as a whole than to any increase in generosity among the population at large, but while the war and her victims might have stirred the overseas Chinese to contribute, this largesse was merely the continuation of a long history of benevolence when it came to helping their countrymen in need.

Chinese Hospitals

For Indochina's overseas Chinese population, illness and hospitalization were also matters that fell into the bailiwick of the congregation. Congregationally specific hospitals provided financial benefit to their members by giving them access to reasonable and, for them, recognizable health care, but the benefits for culture and morale were even greater. For the Chinese in general, treatment at an institution

²⁴³ Note N°3961 from the Governor of Cochinchina, 2 August 1935, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IIA.45/215(E.111).

²⁴⁴ Summary of Anniversary of Sino-Japanese hostilities in Shanghai, 13 August 1938, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IIA.45/254(4).

whose medical practices resembled those with which they were most familiar must have been comforting. The added benefit of health practitioners speaking an individual's own dialect not only must have been comforting, but also must have reduced the potential for misunderstandings and serious mistakes with regard to diagnosis and treatment. Cultural benefits aside, however, the realm of health care was openly contested by Chinese practitioners and sufferers, and the French, who viewed public health as a matter of critical concern to the colonial apparatus.

Major congregations often sought to construct hospitals of their own to deal with the growing demands of their communities in the area. In the case of the Trieu Chau congregation, they chose, under the direction of their president, Tiêt Hung Loi, to build a hospital on the site of their former congregational cemetery.²⁴⁵ For the Trieu Chau, the desire to build a hospital was particularly pressing because the Cantonese and Fujianese congregations already operated hospitals in Cholon; however, it had taken the Trieu Chau many years to reach the implementation stage, primarily because of French resistance. As the President of the Municipal Commission explained things, “[The Trieu Chau congregation] had even acquired land bordering the Low Road for that purpose; but, [such an institution] being inappropriate for this location because of the immediate proximity to European houses, I decided that this congregation must abandon the project.”²⁴⁶ Building a hospital on the grounds of the old cemetery seemed less offensive to the French, however, who were not bothered by the inauspiciousness or irony of the situation. “On the contrary, the ground presently under consideration is very well situated for the construction of an establishment of this kind; it is, in effect, in the Chinese hospital district, far from any

²⁴⁵ Letter from the President of Cholon's Trieu Chau congregation to the President of the Municipal Commission, 17 July 1915, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.8/1814(7).

²⁴⁶ Letter from the President of the Municipal Commission to the Governor of Cochinchina, 19 August 1915, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.8/1814(7).

European houses.”²⁴⁷ This time, the request to open a Trieu Chau hospital was approved.²⁴⁸

Eventually, the furor to open Chinese hospitals reached such a height that an order of the Governor was promulgated simply to regulate the establishment, function, and medical limits of these institutions. For example, no Chinese hospital was allowed to knowingly admit or tend to any patients infected with plague, cholera, or small pox. The new laws applied to all congregational hospitals, and existing hospitals, irrespective of the duration of their previous operations, had only one month to reapply for an operating permit as required by the new guidelines.²⁴⁹ The purpose of this new legislation was to tighten control, not only over the administration of the Chinese hospitals, which rested in the hands of each congregation, but also over the quality and style of medicine practiced in each place, because the Chinese hospitals were deemed “hotbeds of epidemic right in the middle of Cholon.”²⁵⁰ The solution to this problem was first suggested as it pertained to Cholon’s Cantonese hospital, an institution whose financial snafus were apparently quite notorious as evidenced in an exchange between the President of the Municipal Commission and the Congregation President:

You know as well as I that the situation of Cholon's Chinese hospitals, and most particularly of the Cantonese hospital, cannot continue without compromising their very existence. I indicated to you most notably that the Cantonese hospital, having no civil status, had purchased the grounds on which [the hospital] is built in the name of a congregation president and, because of the bankruptcy of the

²⁴⁷ Letter from the President of the Municipal Commission to the Governor of Cochinchina, 19 August 1915, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.8/1814(7).

²⁴⁸ Arrêté by the Governor of Cochinchina, 25 August 1915, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.8/1814(7).

²⁴⁹ Arrêté by A. Le Fol, Governor p.i. of Cochinchina, 30 September 1926, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH VIA.8/314(2).

²⁵⁰ Letter to the Governor of Cochinchina from the President of the Municipal Commission, 27 July 1926, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH VIA.8/314(6).

congregation president, these grounds risked being sold as bankruptcy property.²⁵¹

The solution to these woes, while of undetermined origin,²⁵² seems to have been inspired. By converting all of the Chinese hospitals into charitable associations, each group suddenly became a civil entity completely under the supervision of the Cochinchinese administration, more specifically, the Office of Public Health and Hygiene.²⁵³ This not only allowed for the regular inspection of Chinese hospital sites, but also required a higher level of training, either in Paris or at Hanoi's Medical College, an improvement widely anticipated to increase significantly the quality of treatment received at Chinese hospitals in which the care was often considered, in European eyes, deplorable.²⁵⁴ Improved care, of course, benefited both concerned parties; however, for the Chinese, the more attractive element was, no doubt, the sudden ability to remove their hospitals from the colonial chopping block. Hospitals were a cornerstone of the mutual aid network established by each Chinese congregation to support and succor its Indochinese population. As such, they were extremely important to the status and morale of the congregation as a whole, and were also legitimate organizations of charity, in that they provided care for subethnic brethren of all social classes and with all sorts of maladies. The Chinese accepted the new rules regarding charitable associations and although the rules caused some

²⁵¹ Letter from the President of Cholon's Municipal Commission to the President of the Cantonese Congregation, 9 July 1924, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH VIA.8/314(1).

²⁵² Most likely, the French arrived at the charitable organization solution indirectly, as a way to reduce complaints about the state of hygiene and supervision in the Chinese hospitals. This probability is supported by the fact that Cholon's city administration went to great lengths to convince the Chinese that altering the nature of the hospitals would benefit them tremendously and would be a good deal for all parties concerned.

²⁵³ Letter from the President of the Municipal Commission to the Governor of Cochinchina, 26 March 1928, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH VIA.8/314(1).

²⁵⁴ Letter from the President of Cholon's Municipal Commission to the President of the Cantonese Congregation, 9 July 1924, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH VIA.8/314(1).

bureaucratic difficulties when the Hakka Congregation attempted – with eventual success – to open their own hospital,²⁵⁵ they seem to have been a successful compromise.

Quite apart from the French belief in Chinese susceptibility to plague, death, and general contagion, an issue that will be discussed at length in the latter half of this chapter, the colonial administration begrudged every penny it spent on behalf of people for whom other guarantors could be found. In other words, paying health care costs for a indigenous mendicant was one thing, but paying for a Chinese resident of Indochina was quite another. For any Chinese resident, businessman, or worker, one of two circumstances had to be true: either the individual resided in Indochina legally, in which case the relevant congregation was responsible for all matters concerning his residency, activities, and state of moral and physical well-being; or he resided in Indochina illegally, in which case he still belonged to a specific Chinese subethnic group, which had legal representation in the form of a congregation, which could be held responsible for all matters concerning his residency, activities, and state of moral and physical well-being. In either case, it became clear early on during their colonial tenure that the French Administration would refuse to pay if someone – *anyone* – else could be found to foot the bill.

By 1882, this issue had risen prominently into colonial consciousness when the matter of hospitalization costs for Chinese detained, either for lacking their residency cards or for failure to pay the head tax, gained attention with the budget for the Cho-Quan detention facility. Chinese congregations were already held responsible for reimbursing Cochinchinese authorities for the price of food consumed while in prison;

²⁵⁵ Assorted letters, 1925 – 1928, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH VIA.8/314(1).

however, in a plan that garnered wide praise from his superiors,²⁵⁶ Cochinchina's Chief of Immigration proposed additional levies against the congregations.

I speak to you of prisoners ... who enter the hospital during their detention. Because of the higher daily cost of treatment (0,27\$), even though I deduct the prison food (0,10\$), it seems as though Chinese prisoners do not pay the hospital expenses where the result is that our [cash] receipts, dwindling, stop completely for the individuals who cost us three times as dearly.²⁵⁷

Accordingly, he proposed that each congregation be held responsible also for reimbursing the administration for the cost of hospitalization for any Chinese imprisoned on any immigration violation. It took only 5 days for this new measure to be enthusiastically approved.²⁵⁸

Other health related disputes marred the relationship between the Chinese and the French as well. On March 15, 1910, Truong Thai, the Cantonese director of the rice works operated by the Ban Thai Seng rice company in Cholon's Binh-Đông neighborhood, wrote a strongly worded complaint to Cholon's Provincial Administrator, protesting the unfair treatment he felt his company had received at the hands of the French. On March 14, two doctors employed by the French administration had appeared at the company to investigate a case of bubonic plague that had been discovered in a patient at the Cantonese hospital.²⁵⁹ This Cantonese worker, a man by the name of Lâm Yên,²⁶⁰ had listed the Ban Thai Seng rice works as

²⁵⁶ The widespread approval for this plan is apparent in the margin notes handwritten by various officials on the body of this letter. Letter from the Chief of Immigration, 8 September 1882, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.8/112(4).

²⁵⁷ Letter from the Chief of Immigration, 8 September 1882, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.8/112(4).

²⁵⁸ Letter to the Chief of Immigration, 13 September 1882, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.8/112(4).

²⁵⁹ The exact diagnosis can be found in the letter written by Dr. Dhoste, one of the visiting physicians, concerning the incident at hand. Letter from Dr. Dhoste to the Director of the Municipal Hospital, 14 March 1910, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.8/142(8d).

²⁶⁰ There is some dispute as to his actual name. The letter sent by the Chinese foreman refers to him as Lam Dieu, but all of the colonial documents regarding the incident label him Lâm Yên. Whatever his

his primary residence when he checked in to the Cantonese hospital with the plague. The scenario that unfolded caused great distress to the Ban Thai Seng proprietors.²⁶¹

The attending French physician, Dr. Dhoste, asked the businessman Truong Thai if a man by the name of Lâm Yên worked for their company. Not recognizing the name, Truong Thai told Dhoste that he would check the employee register and let him know for sure. After careful perusal of the records, Truong Thai ascertained that Lâm Yên had worked for the company – for a single day in August of the previous year. Dhoste allegedly told Truong Thai that he knew nothing of the Ban Thai Seng register and preferred to trust in the name written in French and given to him on an index card by the Cantonese Hospital. According to Dhoste’s instructions, he was to close the rice works, disinfect the premises, and inject all of its workers against the plague. During this process, the rice works would be shut for many days and the Ban Thai Seng Company would have to bear the entire cost of the disinfection.²⁶²

The Ban Thai Seng managers questioned why the Cantonese hospital would have provided such an erroneous statement and suggested that they all travel to the hospital in person to clarify the matter. At the hospital, the patient Lâm Yên had deteriorated and was unable to speak; however, the men were able to locate the keeper of the Cantonese hospital registry, who informed them that Lâm Yên had been delivered to the hospital by a laundryman who lived on a different street from the rice works and worked for a different company. Pleased to be proven right but angered by the misinformation, the Ban Thai Seng managers asked to be taken to the Sui Xuong

true name might have been, it seems safe to assume that the name used by the French was the one that appeared on his immigration documents; therefore, I will refer to him as Lâm Yên for the duration of this story.

²⁶¹ Letter from Truong Thai to the Administrator of Cholon Province, 15 March 1910, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.8/142(8d).

²⁶² Letter from Truong Thai to the Administrator of Cholon Province, 15 March 1910, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.8/142(8d).

house on the Rue des Marins to confront their accusers and seek restitution. At that point, Dhoste allegedly dismissed them, saying that this conflict did not concern him and that the Chinese should work it out amongst themselves. Recognizing the enormous financial burden presented by a factory closing and the cost of anti plague measures, the managers asked Dhoste how to settle the affair. He told them he had no more time to waste with them and an agent would appear at the company within 24 hours to commence the disinfection. The company owners, faced with imminent disaster, thus threw themselves upon the mercy of Cholon's provincial administrator.²⁶³

The outcome of this conflict is quite instructive as it reflects upon Sino-French relations in the colony. The Provincial Administrator, E. Rivet, initiated an inquest into the affair to see justice done. The results of the inquest for the Ban Thai Seng Company are not absolutely certain, but the documents definitely imply that the case was not decided in their favor. On the one hand, Drouhet, the mayor of Cholon, castigated the two investigators, Dhoste and Janin, for overstepping their authority and for their boorish behavior in completing a task that should have been achievable "without incurring judgments as offensive as those [incurred by] Mr. Rivet."²⁶⁴ However, he also stated clearly that he did not believe that the Ban Thai Seng compradors had been honest in their assertions regarding Lâm Yên's employment with their firm. This implication of dishonesty, echoed in another letter by Cholon's Administrator,²⁶⁵ suggests that the Ban Thai Seng Company lost its appeal and was subjected to disinfection; however, the harsh words reserved for the two medical

²⁶³ Letter from Truong Thai to the Administrator of Cholon Province, 15 March 1910, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.8/142(8d).

²⁶⁴ Letter from the Mayor of Cholon to Lieutenant Governor, 21 March 1910, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.8/142(8d).

²⁶⁵ Letter from the Administrator of Cholon Province to the Mayor of Cholon, 16 March 1910, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.8/142(8d).

investigators suggest that the Mayor and the Provincial Administrator were not as certain of their verdict as they seemed to be, and that the integrity of the colonial administration, having been brought to bear by the two physicians, could not be overturned, regardless of the truth. This is not meant to imply that Rivet and Drouhet knew that the allegations were false. I merely suggest that they were more concerned about the incident reflecting weakness on the part of the colonial administration than they were about the reality of the incident.²⁶⁶

Cemeteries, Burial, and Death

For overseas Chinese, services associated with death and burial possessed mythical importance as they touched upon one of the most fundamental aspects of Chinese religion and custom: death. One of the most essential functions of Indochina's Chinese congregations was their ability to manage logistics for members who died far from their native soil. Congregations provided a sort of burial insurance for their members. A major perk of the congregation system was that it either arranged for the repatriation of deceased members or granted them access to local burial grounds specific to each subethnic group. In other words, if a Chinese resident could not be buried back in his native place, at least he rested among his compatriots. As historian Elizabeth Sinn notes, "With such a system in place, even deceased migrants could return home to repose in peace and receive offerings from descendents for generations to come, thus fulfilling the grand Chinese ideal of 'returning to the roots'."²⁶⁷

²⁶⁶ Also remarkable is the concern exhibited by Mayor Drouhet about the impression left by the doctors upon the Chinese businessmen. Mayor Drouhet's concern for the offended feelings of the Cantonese could certainly not be considered typical. He was a friend to the rich, including the wealthy Cantonese brothers Ly Dang and Ly Hieu So, and a benefactor to the less fortunate. Among his accomplishments was the creation of many hospitals and schools dedicated to the community and Cholon's Chinese community remembered him fondly many years after his return to France.

²⁶⁷ Sinn, "Moving Bones," 3.



Figure 9 Chinese Tomb²⁶⁸

Despite the ultimate goal of returning to one's native place, the realities of colonial life and death meant that burial – whether temporary or permanent – on Indochinese ground was often inevitable. As the above photograph indicates, local Chinese dead were often interred in Chinese style tombs, replete with stele detailing the lives and lineages of the deceased. The extent of this system is evident from a map of Saigon and Cholon dating from 1923. On this map, each of the five congregations possessed land on the outskirts of town²⁶⁹ used as congregation specific burial grounds. The Trieu Chau, Phuoc Kien, Hakka, and Hainam cemeteries were all located together in an area bounded by train tracks to the west, Boulevard Armand Rousseau to the east, Rue de Polygone in the north, and Rue de General Bayllé to the south. The Cantonese cemetery was also located west of Boulevard Armand Rousseau but some distance from the other cemeteries. Although no information as to the exact

²⁶⁸ <http://images.google.com/imgres?imgurl=http://patrick.guenin.free.fr/indo1930/image/cochin15.jpg&imgrefurl=http://patrick.guenin.free.fr/indo1930/cochin/cochin15.htm&h=322&w=469&sz=50&tbnid=qIYqL1hpytATEM:&tbnh=85&tbnw=125&hl=en&start=10&prev=/images%3Fq%3Dch>. Feb 12, 2006.

²⁶⁹ Present day urban expansion means that the 1923 suburban location of these cemeteries places them well inside the city limits. To the best of my knowledge and based upon personal exploration of the area, none of the original cemeteries remain; in fact, the land for them has been covered by new construction, although many of the bodies were likely relocated to cemeteries further outside of town in the 1930's or 1940's.

number of graves in each cemetery is available, based upon size of territory, the Cantonese, Trieu Chau, and Fujianese cemeteries were the largest.²⁷⁰

On September 9, 1918, the members of the Hygiene Commission of Sađec met on an iron bridge overlooking the Rach Rang River to discuss the establishment of a Fujianese cemetery in the village of Tân Phu Đong. The cemetery was to be built according to the specifications of French law: “outside of the city and in a rice field ... enclosed by walls of brick ... it can be found around 100 meters from the Rach Rang bridge in the countryside and a certain distance from the waterways or [human] residences.”²⁷¹ Despite the fact that the proposed cemetery violated no French regulations, the committee responded to the request with some doubt. M. Mandon, Sađec’s Provincial Agent, noted, “Burials can be made without inconvenience at this place, but the transfer and reburial of mortal remains would be dangerous to the public health.”²⁷² Huynh Thuan, the representative of Sađec’s Phuc Kiên congregation, spoke quickly to clarify the rights of the congrégation. “The graves of dead Chinese [already] exist next to the chosen place. Requests could occur to transfer the human remains of these Asiatics into the projected cemetery.”²⁷³ The local administrator, unable to perceive any legal reason why such a cemetery should be prohibited, agreed to allow both the creation of the cemetery and the transfer of remains between the new and old cemeteries, provided that no plague or other threat to public health existed at

²⁷⁰ Plan de Saigon-Cholon, 1923, TTLTQG1, Gouv Gal 3032.

²⁷¹ Procès-Verbal de la Commission d’Hygiene, 9 September 1918, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IB.24/0411(1).

²⁷² Procès-Verbal de la Commission d’Hygiene, 9 September 1918, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IB.24/0411(1).

²⁷³ Procès-Verbal de la Commission d’Hygiene, 9 September 1918, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IB.24/0411(1).

the time. The committee forwarded the request to establish a new Phước Kiên cemetery on to the Governor, and it was approved on September 12, 1918.²⁷⁴

The significance of this anecdote lies in the thick layers of bureaucracy surrounding the establishment of a Chinese cemetery. If the affected Chinese community guaranteed to abide by all of the applicable legislation surrounding mortal remains, what underpinned the reluctance and suspicion of the French administration when it came to legislating Chinese death? The answer to this question lies in French stereotypes as they concerned the overseas Chinese. Viewed largely as low class coolies and mendicants, Chinese were seen by the French as unsanitary, unhealthy, and dangerous to the public welfare. Cholon's interlocking system of canals, known at the time as the Arroyo Chinois, was characterized by congested waterways, crowded houses, and narrow winding canals, and it proved a perfect breeding ground for all manner of unpleasant pestilences, a condition that certainly owed as much or more to geography and poor urban planning as it did to economic class or any other ethno-cultural concerns.

Additionally, the frequent epidemics ravaging China during the late 19th and early 20th centuries made French colonizers even more paranoid about the possibility of having something like cholera, small pox, or another potentially deadly plague enter Indochina by boat. Years of travel by sea had already educated European powers as to the exponentially increased risk of contagious disease aboard overcrowded ships; when science combined with class-consciousness, ethnocentrism, and racism, the view of Indochina's Chinese as filthy and disease-ridden was the inevitable result. These stereotypes doubtless found further reinforcement in the dilemmas faced by other colonial European powers in Southeast Asia. In Singapore, for example, the British

²⁷⁴ Order establishing the Phuoc Kien cemetery, 12 September 1918, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IB.24/0411(1).

struggled to control epidemics which were so widespread that Chinese deaths from syphilis and other diseases actually managed to offset the massive influx of Chinese immigration into the region.²⁷⁵ Pictures showing hillsides scattered with the coffins of plague victims, such as the following etching from Francis Garnier's 1867 trip through Tonkin and Yunnan in the aftermath of a Chinese cholera epidemic, did little to reassure the French about the Chinese prevalence for disease.

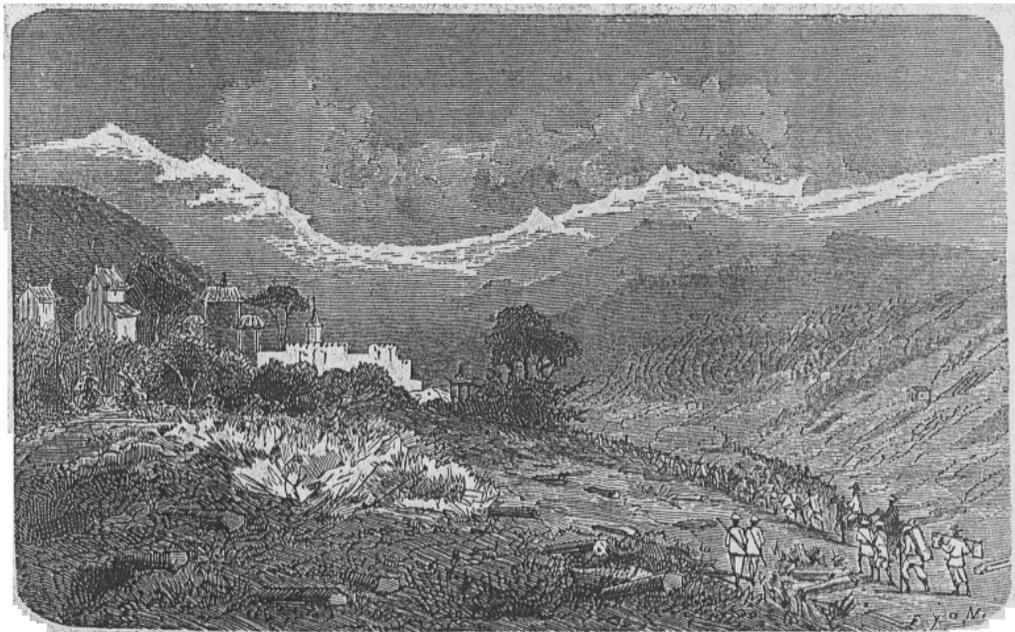


Figure 10 Francis Garnier Etching: Road between Yunnan and Tong Tchouan during the Plague and the Cholera²⁷⁶

Inevitably, plagues borne by indigenous people killed Frenchmen just as readily as those springing from the Chinese quarter. In May of 1897, for example, a terrible outbreak of cholera ravaged Cochinchina. “The sanitary state of Cochin China has not improved. The cholera epidemic raging in the native population claimed some victims among the Europeans of Saigon and in the districts of Soctrang, Bentré, and

²⁷⁵ James Francis Warren, *Ah-Ku and Karayuki-san: Prostitution in Singapore, 1870-1940* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1993).

²⁷⁶ <http://dlxs.library.cornell.edu/cgi/t/text/pageviewer-idx?c=sea;cc=sea;sid=dcb85632653be25ddac3bd2b06733169;q1=cholera;q2=yunnan;op2=and;op3=and;rgn=pages;idno=sea049;view=image;seq=11>. Mar 12, 2007.

Bienhoa. Schools in Bienhoa and Gocong must be dismissed for about ten days. It is feared that the plague will continue its devastation if the rainy season is late in coming.”²⁷⁷ The reasons underlying the French focus upon the Chinese as harbingers of plague are probably three-fold. First, most Chinese lived in urban areas in Indochina, thus posing more of a health threat to the European population, which also enjoyed an urban concentration. Secondly, thousands of Chinese passed into and out of the colony, to and from China, every month. With the publicization of frequent and widespread epidemics in that country, as well as the generally deplorable sanitary conditions on the ships transporting people in and out of the Celestial Empire, it is not particularly surprising that French authorities in Saigon and Cholon, where the lion’s share of the immigration occurred, became extremely concerned about epidemics. Finally, there is a sense in the French sources that the Chinese population resided in Indochina at the sufferance of the French government. No such claim could be made for the indigenous population who, in any case, rarely traveled throughout Southeast Asia and therefore posed little risk of anything but homegrown epidemics.

If burial and reburial caused unease among French administrators, the repatriation of bones was absolutely alarming. Repatriation, of necessity, required skeletons and coffins to be hauled around the countryside and through the city streets to get to the boats that were intended to return them to China, giving them ample opportunity to infect whole villages and cities with potentially deadly diseases. The Order of 12 December 1889 generally placed tight restrictions upon the mass exhumation of Chinese dead and also put forth the basic statutes governing Chinese burials, exhumations, and the repatriation of remains back to China. Accordingly, any large-scale action along those lines required special dispensation from the Cochinchinese government.

²⁷⁷ Monthly Report, 12 June 1897, CAOM, INDO GGI 20481.

On July 29, 1892, Cholon's Cantonese congregation sought just such a dispensation. Phan Hoai, president of Cholon's Cantonese congregation, along with Cham Ling and Luu Luc, both city council members, sent a letter to the mayor of Cholon in which they requested permission to repatriate bones to China. "It is our custom," they wrote, "to raise up the bones of Chinese dead for more than five years and to transport them to China to inter them in their native soil. This is a sacred custom which is religiously observed by every congregation."²⁷⁸ The Cantonese notables go on to describe how each set of bones, upon being exhumed, will be placed in a small box made of solid wood and tightly sealed. Eventually, all of the small boxes would be placed in larger boxes designated for shipment to each of the Chinese provinces in which the bones were to be permanently interred.²⁷⁹

While the plan for repatriation appeared unobjectionable on the surface, the Cantonese apologetically went on to reveal the catch. The Chinese planned on repatriating "many hundreds" of their compatriots; following the specific French instructions about the types of wood allowed for the boxes, the disposition of the empty graves after the exhumations, and the disinfection of all of the graves, coffins, and other affected areas would have been impossible. Accordingly, they sought to "obtain permission [from the Governor of Cochinchina] to proceed with these exhumations in the same way as in preceding years and to make an exception for the particular case [of this repatriation]."²⁸⁰ Except to say "many hundreds," the Cantonese congregation offered no specific numbers when it spoke of its plans for exhuming and transporting its native sons and daughters back to China; however, to

²⁷⁸ Letter from Cholon's Cantonese Congregation to the Mayor of Cholon, 29 July 1892, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IIA.45/296(1).

²⁷⁹ Letter from Cholon's Cantonese Congregation to the Mayor of Cholon, 29 July 1892, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IIA.45/296(1).

²⁸⁰ Letter from Cholon's Cantonese Congregation to the Mayor of Cholon, 29 July 1892, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IIA.45/296(1).

give an idea of the magnitude of this endeavor, a major repatriation such as the one planned by the Cantonese had not occurred in Cochinchina since 1887. At that time, 1607 coffins had made their way back to China. With population increases in the area, Merlande, the mayor of Cholon, proffered a projected estimate for the 1892 repatriation of more than 2000 bodies to be exhumed in Cholon alone.²⁸¹

The Cantonese sought broad spectrum relief from the restrictions put forth in the order of 12 December 1889, but while local administrators seemed to understand the magnitude of the problem, they were unwilling to compromise to most of the points of contention. Cholon's Mayor Merlande proffered his opinion to the Cochinchinese government, writing,

I can only go along with their conclusions that appear to me to be able to be accepted without resulting in any danger to hygiene or to the public health. I only suggest replacing the disinfecting mixture for use inside the coffins with some lime. These [coffins] contain only bones, because the Chinese take great care to remove, immediately upon exhumation, anything that still adheres to [the bones]. It is better, I believe, to fill all the space with some lime, and to reserve the disinfecting mixture for use upon the large external box. The walls of this [large box] and the internal coffins, (made of *sao* wood and solidly secured with iron bands) should be at least 2.5 cms thick. If these regulations are adopted, it would be indispensable to bring them, by a circular, to the attention of M.M. the Administrators, so that they can see to their strict enforcement in their respective districts. [Also, we could] prohibit the shipment of coffins from the interior to Cholon, where true congestion might result. They could be transported either to Go-vap, where the congregation possesses a cemetery, or to another village selected by the administration where they would await their dispatching to China. I do not need to emphasize, Sir General Secretary, the political importance attached to this grave question of exhumations, which has, for the Chinese, a significance so essential because it touches upon the cult of death.²⁸²

²⁸¹ Letter N°386 from the Mayor of Cholon to the Secretary General of Cochinchina, 12 September 1892, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IIA.45/296(1).

²⁸² Letter N°386 from the Mayor of Cholon to the Secretary General of Cochinchina, 12 September 1892, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IIA.45/296(1).

In fact, the Cochinchinese Council of Hygiene and Public Health followed Merlande's recommendations nearly to the letter. As he had requested, the council ordered that the Cantonese congregation build a hut in the Plain of Graves that would be used to store, sort, and pack the bones prior to sending them back to China. This plan kept the macabre spectacle far from Cholon's busy streets, doubtless a great relief to the mayor. As the following picture indicates, Chinese funerals were often extravagant affairs, with throngs of mourners, sign bearers, and noisy bands filling the streets and blocking passage down busy roads until their march to the temple or cemetery was done. However, the council added one more failsafe to the plan for repatriation. They required the presence of one or more European police agents to



Figure 11 Funeral Procession²⁸³

oversee each exhumation in order “to prevent the opening of graves less than five years old and to stop the exhumation of mortal remains whose state of conservation presented a risk of dangerous vapors.”²⁸⁴

²⁸³ http://images.google.com/imgres?imgurl=http://hinhxua.free.fr/autrefois/chinois/Cholon_la_procession_du_dragon.jpg&imgrefurl=http://hinhxua.free.fr/autrefois/chinois/photo_chinois_vn.htm&h=457&w=719&sz=97&tbnid=BguALW0gyy0tqM:&tbnh=88&tbnw=139&hl=en&start=2&p. Feb 12, 2006.

The conflict between colonial legislation, colonial stereotypes, and Chinese cultural and religious practices is highlighted by the struggle over Cantonese exhumations in 1892 and 1893; however, the documents also hint at a separate phenomenon which speaks to the significance of congregations in general, as well as to the hierarchy of individual congregations within the rubric of each subethnic place. When the Mayor of Cholon sent his opinion of the Cantonese repatriation to the Cochinchinese administration, he suggested that the administration “prohibit the shipment of coffins from the interior to Cholon, where true congestion might result.”²⁸⁵ This clearly implies the incipient arrival of bones into Cholon from all over Cochinchina, an idea also borne out by the Lieutenant Governor’s eventual decision with regard to the repatriation.

Geography plays some role in this phenomenon. After all, the Mekong waterways flowed out to sea in a place most convenient for access to Saigon and Cholon; however, the significance of the Cholon congregation in planning and initiating the repatriation strongly suggests that the Cholon congregation held a position of great authority within the hierarchy of Cantonese congregations in Indochina. Although the documents we have examined so far have only dealt with Cochinchina, other tantalizing hints of the scale of this endeavor exist. These include a letter sent to the Resident Superior of Cambodia by Fourés, the Lieutenant Governor

²⁸⁴ Minutes from a meeting of the Council of Hygiene and Public Health, 20 September 1892, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IIA.45/296(1). Other more specific restrictions were placed upon this endeavor by the Cochinchinese Lieutenant Governor in his final statement of approval. For example, remains in small individual boxes had to be arranged in groups of nine and then placed by group in larger boxes. Each box, whether small or large, had to be constructed of *sao* wood or wood of similar quality. The walls of each box also had to be of a specified thickness. Despite these particularities, the only major change to the Mayor’s recommendation concerned European oversight of the process. Details of the final arrangement can be found in Letter N°1889 from the Lieutenant Governor to the Mayor of Cholon, 30 September 1892, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IIA.45/296(1).

²⁸⁵ Letter N°386 from the Mayor of Cholon to the Secretary General of Cochinchina, 12 September 1892, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IIA.45/296(1).

of Cochinchina, which conveys the terms enumerated in the Cochinchina Council of Hygiene and Public Health's response to the exhumation request.²⁸⁶ This is certainly the same exhumation because the deadline for completion of the task is identical.²⁸⁷

The argument for geography and the significance of the Mekong waterways holds true for Cambodia as well; however, the fact that the Cholon-based congregation bore responsibility for dealing with the French administration unquestionably emphasizes that congregation's authority. The congregation in Phnom Penh could easily have arranged an exhumation on its own. As with the Cholon congregation, it had easy access to a center of French Administration in the form of the Resident Superior, and even though the Resident Superior of Cambodia rested beneath Cochinchina's Lieutenant Governor on the ladder of French administrative authority, a direct conduit to French government still existed in Phnom Penh. This suggests that, when faced with an issue of concern to Indochina's Cantonese at large, Cholon's Cantonese congregation was, whether formally or informally, the official representative of Indochina's Cantonese community to the French State.

The last major appearance of the cemetery issue occurred in 1936, just three months before the deadline for moving all of the Chinese cemeteries to an area further outside of town. In this instance, the leaders of all of Saigon-Cholon's congregations met to discuss the feasibility of completing the task by the required date. To assist them in this endeavor, the congregation leaders asked the Chinese Consul in Saigon to join them on a trip out to the new cemetery site, a place considered problematic by the congregations because the "ground was far too uneven and in need of filling in

²⁸⁶ Letter N°38 from the Lieutenant Governor of Cochinchine to the Resident Superior of Cambodge, 12 April 1893, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IIA.45/296(1).

²⁸⁷ "...next December." Letter N°38 from the Lieutenant Governor of Cochinchine to the Resident Superior of Cambodge, 12 April 1893, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IIA.45/296(1).

numerous places.”²⁸⁸ The congregation leaders hoped that the Chinese Consul would intercede for them with the French government on two points: first, that the deadline for the transfer of graves be extended to January 1937, and second, that the government assist them with the cost of the mass exhumations and transfers.²⁸⁹

Just as congregations oversaw the arrivals of Chinese citizens into Indochina, they also bore responsibility for their departures, whether as immigrants, skeletons, or ghosts. The nearly universal desire of overseas Chinese to be buried on their native soil assumed major proportions in Indochina where disease, poverty, and back-breaking labor caused the demise of many Chinese too poor to return to China prior to their deaths or to afford the repatriation of their remains in the event of their passing. Not surprisingly, this desire to return home extended out from the major market centers of Cholon, Saigon, and Hanoi into the rural provinces.

In her work on San Francisco’s overseas Chinese community, Elizabeth Sinn describes Hong Kong as an “in-between” place, defining this idea as “localities which are neither the sending nor the receiving country but transit points where multiple migratory trajectories intersect... Embodying both centripetal and centrifugal forces, in-between places played a special part in defining the shape and texture of the Chinese diaspora.”²⁹⁰ Sinn’s concept, while referring specifically to large entrepôts such as Singapore, Bangkok, and Hong Kong, could perhaps be used to shed some light upon Saigon-Cholon as well. As a major repatriation point for Cochinchinese and Cambodian bones, Cholon did serve as a nexus of exchange, a place from which

²⁸⁸ Extracts from the report of Agent “LOTUS”, 23 March 1936, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IIA.45/215(E.111).

²⁸⁹ Extracts from the report of Agent “LOTUS”, 23 March 1936, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IIA.45/215(E.111).

²⁹⁰ Sinn, “Moving Bones,” 2.

people ventured out in life, and through which they returned to China, whether in life or in death.

Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to illustrate the congregation's oversight of all aspects of the mutual aid process. Whether the issue was disaster, death, or illness, congregations worked closely with their congregants and with the French to find the solutions most beneficial to their community. Additionally, congregations sought to share the burden of cost with the French, a matter that gained importance as the expense of French requirements grew. For reasons of public health, French authorities meticulously regulated all aspects of sickness and death. The added cost of these regulations was inevitably passed on to the congregation. This created friction between the Chinese and the French, a friction that was often resolved through mediation with the congregations. By investigating Chinese desires, French requirements, and the final solutions, Chinese success at wringing concessions from the French becomes more apparent. The mutual aid functions of the congregation were at once troublesome and essential. By providing a sort of social security net to prevent total disaster from befalling their congregants, congregations truly proved their worth to the overseas Chinese community.

CHAPTER 6: PRESERVING CHINESE CULTURE: COMMEMORATIVE AND EDUCATIONAL PURSUITS IN THE CONGREGATIONS

While congregations performed mutual aid functions that assisted overseas Chinese through the most critical periods of their lives, they also enjoyed social responsibilities, nurturing the very souls of their communities by taking responsibility for religious and secular festivals, political commemorations, and the education of young Chinese students in Indochina. The first and foremost obligation of any congregation in Indochina was to provide a meeting place for its congregants. Thus, Chinese congregations were responsible for constructing and maintaining temples and other cultural sites for their dialect community. In keeping with this particular obligation, congregations were also charged with celebrating native-place holidays and ensuring the observance of local religious festivals. As the colonial period progressed, locally-oriented cultural responsibilities began to assume a more nationalistic flavor as congregations took on the task of collecting remittances, first for Qing and anti-Qing activities, and later for the new Republic.

A final social arena in which congregations involved themselves was education. While this might not seem like a true social or cultural responsibility, I have included Chinese education in this category because of the vast cultural differences between the Chinese in each of the Indochinese congregations. These overseas Chinese might have shared a nationality, but for the most part, they did not share a spoken language. The values and concerns of each dialect group differed, as did the gods they worshipped and the professions they tended to pursue. For this reason, the establishment of schools unique to each native place or dialect represents a concerted effort to indoctrinate young Chinese students in the ways of their native place in spite the cultural confusion engendered in the young people as a result of living overseas and at a time of great susceptibility in the students' lives.

The significance of Chinese youth and the importance of education were also acknowledged by the French, as evidenced by their own intense concern for Chinese instruction. Two French schools intended solely for Chinese students, the Ecole Pavie in Hanoi and the Lycée Franco-Chinois in Saigon, will be examined in more detail in the last part of this chapter. This investigation will not only reveal the French motivation behind establishing Chinese schools, but will also show us yet another nexus of interaction between the Chinese in Indochina and the French.

Cultural Functions

Despite the many other functions it embraced, congregations were first and foremost places of gathering and celebration. As has been discussed previously, the Chinese translation of the word *congrégation* is *huiguan*, a word that literally means “temple.” The construction and maintenance of temples was a matter of prime concern to each congregation; after all, without temples, they would have nowhere to meet or to carry out their other non-spiritual agendas. Worship within each temple was quite a personal matter for a community, which meant that daily celebrations and small observances rarely appeared on the colonial radar screen. Large festivals, on the other hand, which involved fireworks, parades, and celebrations that spilled out into the streets, often impacted the cities in which they occurred. Because of this impact, archival documentation concerning larger festivals or ceremonies exists in three forms; archives either contain requests for permission to hold festivals, reports of unsavory or illegal incidents that transpired at celebrations, or intelligence on festivals or commemorations that were deemed by colonial authorities to be politically sensitive, or perhaps even subversive.

In Indochina, as was the case in many of Southeast Asia’s colonies, functions of economy and mutual aid overshadowed the more spiritual roles of the *huiguan* in the public eye, and this phenomenon became more marked as time passed. A colonial

environment required institutions capable of performing intermediary roles, whether politically, economically, or personally. In Indochina, the vital necessity of mediation took precedence over daily piety, at least in the big picture.²⁹¹ The very nature of *huiguan* observances also changed dramatically as the 20th century progressed. The colossal, and even cataclysmic, events of the early 20th century shifted the *huiguan*'s focus from the mundane to the monumental. Parades for *Mazu* lost ground to massive pan-Chinese nationalist movements and the idea of a “Chinese” spirit overtook many of the intricacies of subethnicity in the process. This is not meant to imply that each subethnic community lost the specificities which made it unique – i.e., *Mazu* retained her cultural and religious significance – however, new global political influences required the attention of the Chinese community as a whole and the community responded to that need with enthusiasm.

Around the turn of the 19th century, the majority of the festivals appearing in archival sources are local Buddhist festivities or funerals for local figures. In the 1920's, Sun Yat Sen became the central figure in annual remembrances pursued by the community. By the 1930's and 1940's, however, the outrage of all of Cochinchina's Chinese focused on very public protests and commemorations opposing the Sino-Japanese War and the horrors of the Japanese occupation. This transformation is illustrative of how, for the overseas Chinese, subethnic identity was quickly – if temporarily – subsumed by the global challenges facing China, but more importantly, it strongly suggests that, during a period of time in which China found herself

²⁹¹ That worship remained essential to these communities is evident by the fact that these temples are still in active use today. Whether in Hanoi, Haiphong, Saigon, Cholon, or the remoteness of the Mekong Delta, worshippers stream (or meander, if the temple is less popular) into and out of these temples all day, burning their joss sticks or teaching their children to pray. This is particularly interesting in the case of Cholon's temples, which have often effectively been abandoned by the Chinese who established them. The pious functions of these pagodas endure long after the majority of the community has departed.

occupied and attacked from all sides, the overseas Chinese community took up the mantle of her defense, not only with vast expenditures intended to support the republic, but also by allowing their regional drama to become international drama. They changed the scripts of the more traditional public theater that had been directed at the priorities and revered subjects of their native places and enacted performances on a global stage designed to attract the world's attention.²⁹² This is a story of change.

In 1891, in far north Tonkin near the Chinese border, failure to communicate his intentions resulted in a stiff penalty for the vice-president of the Chinese congregation of K'ỳ Luà.²⁹³ At four in the morning on March 21, a firework display concluded the funeral ceremony of a recently deceased local man. Unfortunately for the congregation, the Chinese had not received permission beforehand for the part of the ceremony involving munitions. When the detonations began in the wee hours of

²⁹² The notion of protests as public street theater is explored in great detail in Jeffrey Wasserstrom, *Student Protests in Twentieth-century China: The View from Shanghai* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991). Wasserstrom deals with Chinese secondary and college students in his book, but his notion that students learned protest techniques from traditional Chinese and Western ceremonies and turned those borrowed "scripts" to their own advantage seems equally applicable to Indochina's overseas Chinese community. Especially in Saigon-Cholon, the sheer spectacle of many overseas Chinese observances – with, for example, grim-faced mourners adorned in black crepe marching in an endless line past the black shrouded portrait of Sun Yat-sen – argues persuasively that Cochinchina's overseas Chinese understood the power of public theater, both as commemoration and as protest. Wasserstrom's observation that "demonstrations that mimic official forms and procedures...[represent] a symbolic attempt to subvert or take control of the ceremonies and stories elites use to justify their rule" (p. 285) also deserves closer attention. While it is arguable that GMD-led commemorations in Indochina were intended to reinforce the dominant paradigm (that is to say, the GMD as elite), the colonial environment and strict regulation by the French of Chinese observances meant that parades, demonstrations, and boycotts organized by any Chinese in the face of French prohibitions were, in fact, forms of subaltern resistance to colonial dominance.

²⁹³ No particular subethnic or dialect group affiliation is given for this particular vice-president. As discussed in the elections chapter of this dissertation, Tonkinese congregations, due to the smaller resident Chinese population in the north, were not always divided by dialect, as were the large congregations of the south. It is possible that this vice-president belonged to one of those plural groups. It is also possible that his affiliation was just not mentioned.

the morning, the civil guard only knew that large explosions were rocking the town. Additionally, the explosions were made, apparently, by “firecrackers of exceptional caliber,”²⁹⁴ meaning that before the cause of the racket could be accurately ascertained, an entire troop of the civil guard was banging on the village door trying to enter. Unfortunately, the village was in such disarray that it took more than twenty minutes for someone to open the door and let the guard into the town.²⁹⁵

This last fact, in particular, seems to be the reason behind the 50 piastre fine levied by the local resident. The Resident’s protest practically glows with chagrin when he castigates the hapless vice-president for failing to get permission for the display in advance, writing.

I blame the vice-president of the congregation for two things: the first being to fire the firecrackers without permission when permission is always given, when it concerns ritual holidays or custom, by the Residence, which warns the military authorities to avoid misunderstandings; the second is to have surveillance that night in the village that was so badly organized that 20 minutes were needed for the police to notice that regular forces required entry.²⁹⁶

In this case, it seems safe to say that the Chinese suffered far more as a result of the embarrassment they caused the young administrator by revealing local military inefficiency than they did for any law breaking.

In 1900, the Cantonese congregation²⁹⁷ in Haiphong sought to avoid difficulties with local French administrators by seeking permission in advance to

²⁹⁴ Letter from the Resident in Langson to the Resident Superior in Hanoi, 25 March 1891, TTLTQG1, RST 29005.

²⁹⁵ Letter from the Resident in Langson to the Resident Superior in Hanoi, 25 March 1891, TTLTQG1, RST 29005.

²⁹⁶ Letter from the Resident in Langson to the Resident Superior in Hanoi, 25 March 1891, TTLTQG1, RST 29005.

²⁹⁷ The congregation is never specified in the documents; however, because all of the arrangements were made in Hong Kong and the monks were to be coming from Hong Kong, it seems reasonable to assume that the Cantonese congregation was the one involved.

celebrate their intended event. They hoped to bring five Buddhist monks into Haiphong to officiate their annual “Grand Buddhist Festival.”²⁹⁸ Unfortunately, colonial biases intervened. At the time, immigration from Hong Kong was considered a public health hazard, no doubt due to rampant epidemic in the region. The first request to allow the arrival of these monks was flatly denied. When the congregation responded by asking what they could do to alleviate the health concerns of the administration, the Resident Superior dashed their hopes. He insisted that the only way the monks would be allowed into the country was if they submitted to a 12-day quarantine to ensure that were not carriers of any plague.²⁹⁹ Whether or not the congregation went ahead with their plans is unknown, but this anecdote does reveal the many hidden pitfalls of congregational worship.

Even before the widespread politicization of the Chinese community in the 1920’s and 1930’s, not all festivals involving Chinese were religious. A large market fair planned in 1903 emphasized the importance of Chinese in the economic life of Cầu-đỏ province. In a letter sent to the Resident Superior in Hanoi, Cantonese shopkeeper Lục Đạt Tsiêu offered his own opinion of how the festival should be run.

The Resident of Cầu-đỏ province, to gather together all of the storekeepers and bearers of goods and animals from provinces near and far at Cầu-đỏ’s big market fair, is going to inaugurate a holiday with public entertainment. To make this gathering great in public opinion, I found a very effective and advantageous means to benefit the administration and to compensate for expenses caused by this gathering: that is, to authorize the games of chance.³⁰⁰

²⁹⁸ Once again, the exact festival is not specified but because the issue seemed pressing and negotiations to bring in the monks were occurring in mid-August, the large annual celebration was most likely the mid-Autumn festival (*Zhongqiujie*).

²⁹⁹ Letter from the Residence Superior, 17 August 1900, TTLTQG1, RST 8905.

³⁰⁰ Letter from Lục Đạt Tsiêu to the Resident Superior, 29 August 1903, TTLTQG1, RST 4827.

Lục Đạt Tsiêu proceeded to outline a detailed plan to introduce gambling to the festival and thereby recoup the cost to the administration of holding the fair in the first place. Now, Lục Đạt Tsiêu had already approached Cầu-đồ's Resident with this request and had been told that the Resident lacked the authority to allow such activities and any such requests would have to be made to his superiors. This circumstance suggests two things: first, that Lục Đạt Tsiêu was important enough within the community that the local Resident was reluctant to deny his request outright, and second, that Lục Đạt Tsiêu felt comfortable enough to scrawl out a handwritten note seeking permission from the Resident Superior to alter the festival, ostensibly to alleviate the financial burden on the French government, but most likely to increase the enjoyment of the many Chinese merchants and traders who would be present at the festival.

By the mid-1920's, public Chinese festivals had assumed a more somber air. Ceremonies commemorating Sun Yat Sen's death occurred annually and were allowed by the French administration because of "the importance of the Chinese colony of Cochinchina, which can be estimated at around 300,000 inhabitants."³⁰¹ During the 1925 commemoration, a majority of businesses were closed on the evening of April 11 and not reopened until April 14. A number of flags were also kept at half-mast during that time. An estimated 15,000 to 20,000 Chinese attended the actual ceremony itself, at which time they marched past a large portrait of Sun Yat Sen which was on display in the Great Room of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce building. No speeches were given, but back cotton armbands were available for purchase, and every participant received a small portrait and biography of Sun Yat Sen.³⁰² As even the French noted in the event report, "these ceremonies... seem to have as much a political character as a

³⁰¹ Letter to the Governor General, 30 June 1925, CAOM, INDO GGI 17514.

³⁰² Letter to the Governor General, 16 April 1925, CAOM, INDO GGI 17514.

religious [one].”³⁰³ Also of interest is the fact that this commemoration was not led by the congregations directly, but was instead directed by a steering committee appointed by the congregations and led by a single individual, Tran Kiet Du. Although the following pictures depicts the arrival of an imperial mission into Cholon, it still conveys a sense of the political authority wielded by Indochina’s overseas Chinese, who were courted on all sides by political factions from China who traveled overseas seeking moral and material support for their many different causes.

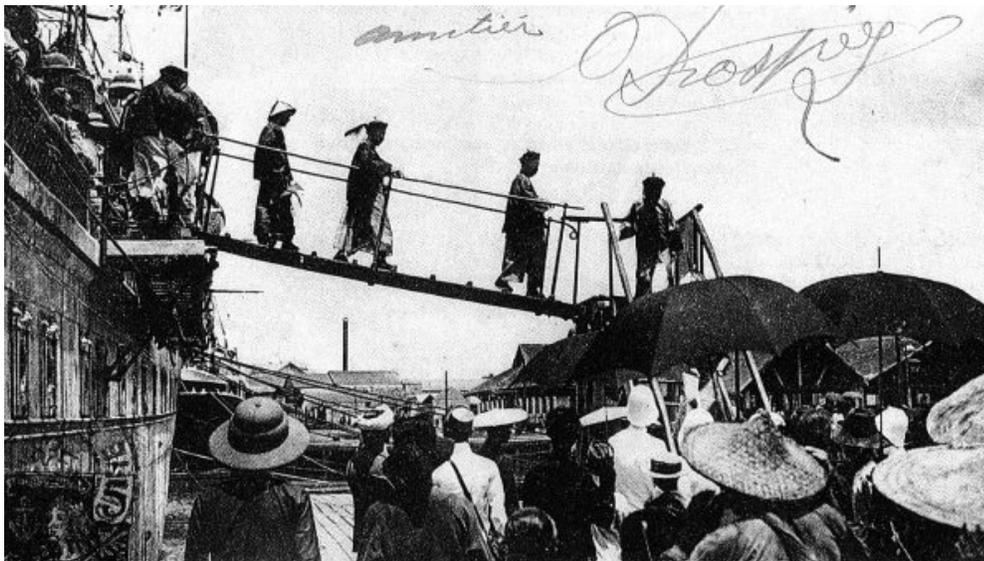


Figure 12 Imperial Mission³⁰⁴

By the 1930’s, the typical gathering seems to have assumed a more serious, and an even more overtly political, character. In a two-month period in 1938, French intelligence reported two patriotic gatherings of Chinese. The first, occurring on May 9, was a meeting intended “to commemorate the 23rd anniversary of China’s national humiliation.”³⁰⁵ A number of local dignitaries attended this meeting, including Chau

³⁰³ Letter to the Governor General, 16 April 1925, CAOM, INDO GGI 17514.

³⁰⁴ http://images.google.com/imgres?imgurl=http://hinhxua.free.fr/autrefois/chinois/Cholon_la_processi_on_du_dragon.jpg&imgrefurl=http://hinhxua.free.fr/autrefois/chinois/photo_chinois_vn.htm&h=457&w=719&sz=97&tbnid=BguALWogyy0tqM:&tbnh=88&tbnw=139&hl=en&start=2&p. Feb 12, 2006.

³⁰⁵ Letter from the Police commissioner, 22 June 1938, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IIA.45/254(4).

Khai So, the Cantonese Party Executive; Hua Nai, pupil to the Chinese Consul,³⁰⁶ Wu Ning Hing, the Trieu Chau Guomindang Secretary; and Dac Dinh, President of Cholon's Hainam congregation. Each of the dignitaries gave a speech reminding the audience that on that day, 23 years ago, the Japanese had forced Yuan Shikai to sign the 21 unequal treaties that "caused great damage to China and a humiliation unparalleled."³⁰⁷ In the face of this national trauma, the speakers called for "solidarity, and [appealed] to the patriotism of their fellow countrymen to erase this shame."³⁰⁸

A few weeks later, on June 22, 1938, the Fujianese School, with the help of many of the area's other Chinese schools, staged yet another patriotic event, this time a fundraiser. The evening's program took place in Cholon's China Theater. In addition to patriotic comedies, this event provided exhibitions of Chinese martial arts, as well as traditional Chinese singing and dancing performed by school children. The Chinese Consul attended the event, which raised 2000 piastres for the Chinese ministries, and most of the other Chinese dignitaries in Saigon and Cholon attended as well.

Events like these evidence the fact that, on the public stage, the focus had shifted from the affairs of individual congregations and the private interests of subethnic place, to the larger issues confronting China, issues of vital interest and importance to *every* subethnic place. The prominent involvement of young students in these affairs also indicates the pervasiveness of nationalist concerns within the Chinese community. Events such as the program held at the Ecole Foukien were not the somber provenance of politically aware adults worried about their nation's fate;

³⁰⁶ This title literally reads "Élève-Consul de Chine," and I am unsure if this means that Hua Nai was the student of the Chinese Consul, or actually his understudy.

³⁰⁷ Letter from the Police commissioner, 22 June 1938, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IIA.45/254(4).

³⁰⁸ Letter from the Police commissioner, 22 June 1938, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IIA.45/254(4).

instead, they sought to educate and involve the entire Chinese community, young and old, in the struggles of the Chinese nation.

As the 1930's ebbed, commemorations and nationalistic demonstrations became even more pointed and endemic. Pamphlets and tracts designed to encourage the participation of all overseas Chinese in patriotic demonstrations circled freely around the dates of major incidents in China. One of the largest demonstrations occurred on July 7, 1938, the first anniversary of the Marco Polo Bridge Incident. Newspapers and other printed media had already published formal announcements made by the "National Salvation Union," demanding that July 7 be a day of mourning.³⁰⁹ One such advertisement read:

COMMEMORATION OF THE JULY 7, 1937 INCIDENT

With the approach of the sad anniversary of the occurrence of the Lou Keou Kiao Incident³¹⁰ on July 7, 1938, the National Salvation Union, to honor the memory of the officers and soldiers fallen upon the field of honor and that of the civilian victims of the bombardments, has made the following decisions:

Chinese immigrants in Cochinchina are invited to sign over one day's worth of salary or income for the sake of national salvation;

The Consul is requested to inform the local government that all Chinese businesses will be closed this day as a sign of mourning.

Five big meetings will occur, alternating between the Chinese theatres of Saigon and Cholon, and all of the Chinese colony may participate freely.

On July 7, from 6 am to 6 pm, Chinese immigrants throughout Indochina should wear black crepe armbands.

All festivities will be suspended.

³⁰⁹ Note from the Governor General, 1 July 1938, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IIA.45/254(4).

³¹⁰ This is a reference to the *Lukouqiao*, or Marco Polo Bridge, Incident that began the Sino-Japanese War.

The National Salvation Union has already printed a circular inviting all Chinese groups to carry out these directions.³¹¹

The seriousness of the emotion surrounding this event in Chinese history cannot be overlooked and the heartfelt interest in China's plight shines through in the circulars devoted to achieving pan-Chinese solidarity on the anniversary of the Marco Polo Bridge Incident. One circular declares,

The invaders have occupied our territory, violated our sovereignty and massacred our civilian population. We will never forget the enormous sacrifices made by the soldiers at the front and we must express to them our deepest sympathy. On the occasion of the anniversary of July 7, think on this tragedy and fervently swear to revenge those who died and to carry out their duty. In the face of grave national peril, our fellow countrymen abroad must increase their efforts to fulfill our mission of restoring our nation and our race.³¹²

Flyers such as these clearly communicate the connection felt by overseas Chinese to events in China. Also apparent from this text is the notion that when China could not help herself, her citizens abroad must come to her rescue. Chinese everywhere, it seems, had a moral obligation to save the nation, and to save the entire Chinese race, irrespective of dialect or subethnic place identity.

These activities enjoyed a widespread following. In Cànthòr, all of the Chinese congregations asked their members to close their businesses for the day, an event that drew nearly unanimous participation. In addition to donating a day's income, Cànthòr's Chinese also donated half the cost of a day's expenses, money that was

³¹¹ Translation of article from the *Information for Cochinchina's Chinese*, 1 July 1938, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IIA.45/254(4).

³¹² Circular addressing Chinese immigrants on the occasion of the first anniversary of the July 7 Incident, 6 July 1938, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IIA.45/254(4). This flyer is particularly remarkable because it was signed by five prominent local Chinese. Most such circulars were anonymous because of the unwelcome French attention generated upon an individual who became politically involved. The open nature of these commemorative activities further underscores the significance of this event and its remembrance in overseas Chinese eyes.

added to the 1000 piastres that had already been raised by the community to succor the victims of the Sino Japanese War.³¹³ Also, in the Cantonese temple, 280 people, 80 of whom were students at local Chinese schools, listened to speeches and observed a moment of silence in honor of the war's victims.³¹⁴ In Bac Lieu, local French authorities refused the congregations permission to hang national flags to commemorate the day, but the Chinese did close their shops, wear crepe armbands, and distribute flyers.³¹⁵ In Saigon and Cholon, in addition to the business closings, as many as 10,000 Chinese from all of the congregations paraded through the Chinese Consulate in Saigon from 7 o'clock in the morning to 5 o'clock in the afternoon, paying their respects to a portrait of Sun Yat Sen hanging there.³¹⁶

Failure to participate in these events meant incurring the displeasure of the local Chinese community. The proprietor of the Hiệp-Loi Restaurant was beset by a group of 20 Chinese men because of his failure to close shop. In the ensuing scuffle, a number of chairs and tables were overturned, although no one was hurt.³¹⁷ In Cholon, passers by roughed up a Chinese tailor named Trac Binh-Trung when they discovered that he had been selling black armbands for his own profit, rather than to benefit national salvation. The hapless Trac Binh-Trung's troubles did not end with a beating at the hands of his countrymen, however. When local police arrived to break up the fight, they determined that Trac Binh-Trung's residency permit had expired, and he was carted off to detention. Also in Cholon, a group of passing Chinese threw stones at a brothel on Cây-Mai street that had remained open despite the ban, and a

³¹³ Letter from the Administrator of Cànthờ, 7 July 1938, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IIA.45/254(4).

³¹⁴ Letter from the Administrator of Cànthờ, 8 July 1938, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IIA.45/254(4).

³¹⁵ Letter from the Administrator of Bac Lieu, 8 July 1938, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IIA.45/254(4).

³¹⁶ Intelligence Report on Chinese activities, 8 July 1938, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IIA.45/254(4).

³¹⁷ Letter from the Administrator of Cànthờ, 8 July 1938, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IIA.45/254(4).

number of traveling restaurateurs were forced to suspend business after being confronted by groups of Chinese.³¹⁸

In his 2003 book, Chinese Capitalists in Japan's New Order, historian Parks Coble discusses the reconstruction and rehabilitation of the narrative of the heroic Chinese capitalist, commenting that “at the turn of the [20th] century, remembrance of the war has become a touchstone of Chinese identity, a point of unity between Chinese in the People's Republic and those living outside.”³¹⁹ While this point is a fascinating reflection on current attitudes in the People's Republic, the narrative of the Chinese in Indochina suggests something even larger. Not only does it suggest that the Sino-Japanese war became a benchmark of Chinese identity almost immediately after the initial Japanese attack, but it also implies that compliance with anti-Japanese collective action served as a yardstick for patriotism and “Chinese-ness” for Cochinchina's overseas Chinese as well. The significance still accorded to the Japanese occupation sixty years or more after its occurrence, as well as its indelible imprint on the minds of ethnic Chinese around the world, speaks persuasively of how powerful the feelings and reactions to China's national humiliation and shame must have been while China was still enduring them.

But in spite of the impression left by these solemn events, not every Chinese political anniversary was an occasion for sorrow. For example, on May 5, 1938, 30 Chinese from different congregations, unions, and schools met to celebrate the 17th anniversary of the establishment of Sun Yat Sen's Chinese Revolutionary Government. Far from the solemn mourning exhibited in many political meetings at the time, attendees at this function listened to a speech telling them of the many trials and tribulations experienced by Dr. Sun on his road the Chinese independence. They

³¹⁸ Intelligence Report on Chinese activities, 8 July 1938, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IIA.45/254(4).

³¹⁹ Parks Coble, *Chinese Capitalists in Japan's New Order: The Occupied Lower Yangtze, 1937-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 205.

were reminded of the many services Dr. Sun had offered his country and encouraged to remain patriotic and true to his ideals, especially in the face of the troubles currently besetting China.³²⁰

Education: The Funding, Establishment, and Operation of Schools

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of overseas Chinese organizations in general is the concerted effort they directed towards maintaining the social and cultural integrity of their settlements abroad. Overseas Chinese connections to native place did not freely give overseas Chinese a base of support for business ventures and a place of retreat in the event of disaster; in return for this nurturing, these ties implicitly required that overseas Chinese communities retain as many as possible of the linguistic, cultural, and social practices of the native place. One of the most efficient ways to achieve this cultural continuity was through the establishment of Chinese schools. Not only did schools provide the fundamental language training required to keep young Chinese students living abroad functionally literate in Chinese and fluent in their native tongues, but, as schools were typically affiliated with specific congregations, they ensured that many of the cultural and religious practices were transmitted as well.

The significance of these schools to the overseas Chinese community is borne out in numbers. By 1929, somewhere in the vicinity of 130 private Chinese schools existed in Cochinchina alone, and requests to open them came in at such a pace that French authorities found themselves buried beneath applications they had increasingly less time to process.³²¹ These functioning schools proved to be the least of French concerns. As early as 1925, the French began a campaign against unauthorized Chinese schools as a result of independently derived concerns about the issue on the

³²⁰ Letter from the Chief Constable, 5 May 1938, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IIA.45/254(4).

³²¹ Letter from the Governor of Cochinchina, 11 January 1929, CAOM, INDO GGI 51557.

parts of the Residents Superior in Tonkin and in Cambodia. Hanoi's Governor General demanded detailed intelligence estimates of the pervasiveness of these institutions, concerned by the risk they posed to public order, particularly if they became politically adversarial.³²²

In Indochina, congregations and schools enjoyed a unique relationship that not only nurtured the youngsters from each native place and ensured the perpetuation of Chinese language and cultural among children whose actual experience in their homeland was often quite limited, but also, by encouraging multidirectional ties between the colonies and the native place, strengthened the relationship between each native place and the congregation that called it home. This strengthening of ties occurred in a number ways. Most commonly, instructors from the native place were brought to Indochina to direct local schools or to teach, especially at the elementary level; however, congregations also worked to strengthen education back in the native place, offering more than teaching jobs to their fellow countrymen when the situation allowed. In both situations, the symbiotic relationship between congregation and native place offered benefits to the homeland as well as to the expatriate community.

In 1902, Cholon's Phuoc Kien congregation sought permission to open a collection among its members in order to raise money for the establishment of a school in Amoy where young Chinese students would learn to speak French.³²³ At the time, the sole non-Chinese school in the city was an American-sponsored school with English as the primary language of instruction. Cholon's Phuoc Kien community felt that the establishment of such a school would serve to enhance the trade in Indochina and improve commerce by strengthening ties with the French.³²⁴ From the French

³²² Private Chinese Schools in Indochina, 1925, CAOM, INDO GGI 51556.

³²³ Letter from the President of Cholon's Phuoc Kien congregation, 17 October 1902, CAOM, INDO GGI 18331.

³²⁴ Letter from the French Consul in Amoy, 15 January 1903, CAOM, INDO GGI 18331.

perspective, closer ties with Chinese resident in Indochina and an improved image among the Fujianese had much to offer; however, Cochinchina's Lieutenant Governor remained quite skeptical of the undertaking, concerned that curriculum at the school would be completely outside of French control, and therefore, suspect.³²⁵ Surprisingly, the opportunity to attempt to balance out English-speaking influence in Amoy was not much of a concern for the Lieutenant Governor.



Figure 13. Ecole de Foukien Building, Cholon, 2002³²⁶

As the above photograph indicates, Cholon's Fujianese community successfully established a school for Fujianese children in the city of Cholon; however, a French-oriented Fujianese school in Amoy offered certain benefits as well. From the Fujianese perspective, the advantages of such a school and the accessibility

³²⁵ Letter from the Lieutenant Governor, 21 October 1902, CAOM, INDO GGI 18331.

³²⁶ Taken by the Author, 2002.

it provided to French language instruction seem clear; however, the benefits for the Phuoc Kien congregation in Cholon were not insignificant either. By creating a school to which the congregation's name would certainly be affixed, the congregation ensured good publicity in the native place. After all, the quantity, frequency, and significance of remittances played a major role in determining local prestige. More practically, the ability to speak a colonial language did wonders for an individual's success in the colonial environment. Easy access to French instruction in Amoy virtually guaranteed a steady influx of young laborers and fortune seekers capable of dealing personally with the vicissitudes of the French administration in Indochina.

Requests for permission to establish, direct, or teach at a Chinese school reached colonial desks most frequently, and although these requests have the appearance of mere formalities, certain impressions gleaned from them cast light upon the complex, and even transnational, connections involved in primary and secondary Chinese education in Indochina. The height of the Chinese school movement appears to have been from 1926 to 1929. Although it is difficult to say for certain why Chinese schools were most prolific during these particular years, regional politics certainly played a major role in this phenomenon. In Guangzhou and Nanjing, the Guomintang Party's calls for Chinese solidarity and for the material and ideological support of the overseas Chinese community at large must have influenced the increasing numbers of Chinese schools. Furthermore, the gradual politicization, not only of China, but of Southeast Asia's overseas Chinese communities as well, was reaching its height, and wars waged on Chinese soil had not yet refocused Indochina's overseas Chinese community exclusively towards national relief, supporting the war efforts, and opposing the Japanese invasion.

Internal Chinese politics had a history of disrupting study abroad for Chinese students. In one particular case, that of the Chinese student Tchêng Tchong Hoa, the

massive upheavals that occurred in China during the 1911 revolution forced him to abandon his education at the College of the Protectorate in Tonkin in order to return to China to help his family, which had been ruined by the events of the revolution.³²⁷ The situation did not improve as the century progressed. The abrupt and bloody split in 1927 between the Communists and the Guomindang in China meant that young Chinese students were likely safer in Indochina than in major Chinese cities, particularly Canton, the city through which many of Indochina's Chinese reached the colonies.³²⁸ In fact, this event was likely responsible for much of the increased demand for Chinese education in Indochina. Chinese schools also became one of the focal points for the *guoyu* movement in Indochina. By unifying the national spoken language, the chances for greater national unity and pan-Chinese solidarity increased. Chinese schools and associations seemed the most logical places to pursue the task of linguistic standardization.³²⁹

The most interesting transnational connections are seen, not in the curriculums of various Chinese schools in Indochina, but in the process of establishing them and hiring people to teach at them. A Chinese congregation or Chinese school in Indochina required a teacher or director for their school. They found the person they were most interested in hiring and determined whether or not the individual was qualified to perform the tasks of the job. If they were deemed acceptable by the hiring institution, their dossier was forwarded to French authorities, most often the Governor General. The French government examined the applicants for security issues or

³²⁷ Letter from Tonkin's Head of Public Education, 2 January 1912, TTLTQG1, RST 8279.

³²⁸ In his book *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945*, David Marr also mentions the violence of the CCP-GMD split as another reason for the increase in Vietnamese students staying home for their education. David Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1981), 40.

³²⁹ Summary of Anniversary of Sino-Japanese hostilities in Shanghai, 13 August 1938, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IIA.45/254(4).

criminal histories. If they had clean records, the dossier was forwarded to the French Consul governing the area from which the applicant received his diploma. Practically speaking, this step usually involved the application being sent to the French Consul in Canton. After the Consul in Canton, the French Consul in Fuzhou was the most likely recipient; however, occasionally, the packets went all the way to the French Legate in Peking, or even more rarely, back to France, if the applicant had been educated in Europe.

Upon receipt of the packet, the French Consul in China was responsible for verifying the diploma or degree that the applicant professed to have. In some cases, the Consul had only to inquire at the relevant school to have the diploma or years of study confirmed,³³⁰ but confirmation was not always an easy process. After contacting the schools attended by the applicants and receiving, or failing to receive, confirmation of the applicant's course of study, the French Consul then forwarded that information back to the Governor General, who issued the order that qualified the individual to teach or to open his own school. If the applicant attempted to obtain qualification without the support of his congregation or a hiring institution, he could do so on his own, but support from the congregation president, even if it came in the form of a character endorsement, facilitated the process enormously.

The tumultuousness of the Chinese past made verification extremely difficult in some instances, especially if an applicant's credentials predated the Chinese Republic. In one case involving the opening of a Cantonese school to teach Chinese characters, the French Consul could not locate a school at all until he eventually determined that the institution was a missionary school run by Americans.³³¹ In the

³³⁰ Failure to have a diploma from an institution was not necessarily an obstacle to employment as a teacher. Teacher qualification depended upon a number of factors, including years of study and subjects to be taught.

³³¹ Request to teach Chinese characters, 1929, CAOM, INDO GGI 44074.

instance of Cantonese Ho Sui-Yin, who sought to open a private school in Cholon, neither the current nor former provincial records yielded any results. It was eventually determined that the degree from his institution, the Teaching School of Canton, had been awarded in the 32nd year of the reign of Emperor Guangxu, during the Qing dynasty.³³²

In 1928, three Cantonese men, Tchang Tse-Tsen, Liao Si-Tsien, and Ly Tho-Sum, sought to open a Chinese private school, in their city of residency, Hué.³³³ When the French Consul in Canton attempted to verify their credentials, he found that only one of them, Ly Tho-Sum, had a verifiable course of study. For Liao Si-Tsien, no documentary evidence could be found, but Guangdong's Office of Instruction, when presented with a copy of his diploma and his photograph, was able to confirm that he had received a degree from the defunct school of the former provincial government. As for Tchang Tse-Tsen, no records of instruction were found for him at all.³³⁴ Whether Tchang was trying to deceive the French by allying himself with other men of letters, or whether he was the unfortunate victim of political dislocation, we will never know, but this anecdote does serve to reinforce the notion that unrest in China could have a dramatic impact in the lives of men trying to make their fortunes abroad.

Who were these people who wanted to teach? While it is possible that a female instructor slipped through the cracks, the records indicate that all of them were men. They came from many different provinces and sought to teach a wide array of subjects. Cantonese applicants predominated, although many Fujianese and Hainanese sought to open schools or to teach as well. Hainanese applications were also verified through the French Consul in Canton. Trieu Chau communities also sought new schools and teachers but unless Hakka teachers worked at pan-Chinese

³³² Letter from the French Consul in Canton, 20 October 1926, CAOM, INDO GGI 44049.

³³³ Letter from the Governor General, 28 September 1927, CAOM, INDO GGI 44058.

³³⁴ Letter from the French Consul in Canton, 12 June 1928, CAOM, INDO GGI 44058.

schools in the provinces, there are no records of specifically Hakka schools outside of major cities. Some men had been academically successfully; others had barely passed their final exams. Most had finished secondary school but a few had only attended primary schools. These latter were mainly enlisted as teachers of Chinese characters. All but two or three applicants had in common the nearly universal absence of college degree, although several had gone to Normal schools or other teaching institutions. Many applicants sought only to teach Chinese characters, although some applicants were able to teach any primary subject assigned to them. Also, the majority of them had attended school in Canton, although Amoy and Fuzhou were also fairly common. Outside of those cities, applicants had studied at schools or universities in Beijing, Yunnan, Hainan Island, or, occasionally, Indochina itself.

Perhaps the most surprising aspect of the data concerning these schools deals with the numbers and locations of them across Indochina. Schools either already existed or were being established in more than 25 cities and towns across Indochina, and many of the places were quite small and rural. The city of Faifo³³⁵ alone had two requests involving Hainanese education, one each from the Cantonese and Trieu Chau communities there, and one request of indeterminate origin. Of course there were requests involving schools in Hanoi, Haiphong, Cholon, and Nam Đĩnh, but there were also requests from Thu Xa, Tuy Hoa, Vinh, and Phanri. This implies quite a depth of penetration, extending well out from major urban centers into smaller towns in all three regions of present-day Vietnam, a fact that seems, especially in the case of Annam, to fly in the face of basic demographic assumptions with regard to the demand for Chinese education: first, that access to Chinese schools would largely have been limited to Cochinchina, Cambodia, and Tonkin as a result of the large Chinese populations living there, and second, that smaller towns and villages would not have

³³⁵ Currently known as Hội An

the Chinese population required to support their own particularistic Chinese schools.³³⁶

The Ecole Pavie and the Lycée Franco-Chinois

The previous section of this chapter has discussed overseas Chinese education in some detail, but French authorities also tried their hand at establishing schools in Indochina for Chinese students. The Ecole Pavie, located in Hanoi, was the first school created in Indochina for the Chinese in general, and for the sons of mandarins in particular. Mandarins from the Chinese provinces bordering Tonkin, primarily Yunnan and Guangxi, sent their sons to Hanoi to study at this school. In Hong Kong, the British were concurrently in the process of establishing an Anglo-Chinese Universities. The French took quite badly their inability to compete with the English in attracting young sons of Chinese notables to their schools. The Ecole Pavie, founded in 1904, was one of the first French efforts to rectify that perceived imbalance, and it was at once a great success and a terrible failure. This is its story.

In June 1904, Li Tsao-tien, the Taotai and Minister for Foreign Affairs in Yunnan, sent a letter to the Governor General inquiring about French options for educating his two sons, who were 22 and 16 years of age. In particular, he wanted to know if there was a school for French students that his sons could attend, in order to learn French and to become more acquainted with Yunnan's neighboring colonialists.³³⁷ No such school existed, but after the Governor General's inquiry, Tonkin's Resident Superior suggested opening a boarding school for sons of Chinese notables, where, for example, Yunnan's Taotai's sons could mingle with the sons of

³³⁶ Unless otherwise specified, the information contained in the above paragraphs has been composed from careful examination of the following files: CAOM, INDO GGI 44048, 44049, 44050, 44051, 44053, 44054, 44055, 44056, 44057, 44058, 44059, 44060, 44062, 44063, 44064, 44065, 44066, 44069, 44072, 44073, 44074, 44075, 44076, 44077, 44078, 44080, 51551, 51553, 51554, 51555, 51557, 51560, 51599.

³³⁷ Letter from the Consul for Foreign Affairs in Yunnan, 19 June 1904, TTLTQG1, Gouv Gal 4820.

Longtcheou's Taotai, who were already based in Hanoi.³³⁸ Plans were immediately underway to establish the school.

On September 17, 1904, the Governor General told his Chief of Cabinet that he was "of the opinion that the school for the sons of the Chinese mandarins should be formed at once." Also in this response, he approved the school's rather steep annual fee of 1200 francs per student and said that he would inform the French Consul at Yunnan of the plans to create the school.³³⁹ In just a few weeks, the response of Yunnan's minister arrived.

I would suggest sending, every year, to Hanoi, a certain number of pupils, some of whom would go on, after [finishing in Hanoi], to complete their studies in France. Given the movement that exists in all the parts of the Empire to entrust the care of educating young Chinese men to the Japanese, there would perhaps be enough interest to create a university in Hanoi where one could fight against this anti-foreign influence.³⁴⁰

After receiving such a positive response from China, matters unfolded with surprising speed. By December, 22 Chinese students from Yunnan, 10 of whom had already been admitted to the new school by examination, departed for Hanoi, escorted by Léang Siang, a Provincial mandarin.³⁴¹ The French were pleased with the initial enrollment of 10 students, but realistic about the importance of it. "[The Chinese] wanted to try an experiment, and, to prove it, sent forty students to Japan and ten to Tonkin. If they are satisfied, next year the proportion can be reversed."³⁴²

³³⁸ Letter from the Resident Superior, 8 August 1904, TTLTQG1, Gouv Gal 4820.

³³⁹ Telegram from the Governor General to the Head of Cabinet, 8 October 1904, TTLTQG1, Gouv Gal 4820.

³⁴⁰ Letter from the Consul for Foreign Affairs in Yunnan, 19 June 1904, TTLTQG1, Gouv Gal 4820.

³⁴¹ Letter from the Consul for Foreign Affairs in Yunnan, 18 December 1904, TTLTQG1, Gouv Gal 4820. Subsequent documents give this mandarin's name as Léang Yu.

³⁴² Ecole Pavie: Monthly report from January 1905, 31 January 1905, TTLTQG1, Gouv Gal 4821.

As the end of the first year approached, prospects for the young school looked bright; the students had progressed nicely, no issues of discipline had arisen, and both the Chinese and the French seemed optimistic.³⁴³ Even the Minister of Asian Affairs in Paris applauded the colonial efforts, encouraging them to increase enrollment at the school and to look into founding an Indochinese university, all for purposes of garnering international political equity and increasing the spread of French influence. For the minister, the use of French as the educational medium in Hanoi's schools for young Chinese was of paramount political importance. "The increasing importance for us of counterbalancing Japanese influence in China will seem to you, certainly, to justify all of the measures intended to propagate the use of our language."³⁴⁴

In 1906, the timbre of the school began to change when several students submitted a petition requesting permission to be allowed to practice military tactics for half a day every day.³⁴⁵ At first, the request was denied. The Governor General had consulted with the Minister of Foreign Affairs in Yunnan, who had demurred, commenting, "These young people are destined for civil service careers."³⁴⁶ Despite this official reluctance, the request was granted a short time later, and the Ecole's students began to study the art of war under French soldiers in Hanoi.³⁴⁷

The first indication that the French might regret that decision came quickly when an excerpt from a letter sent by an Ecole Pavie student appeared in the Chinese press:

Yunnannese students in Hanoi sent a letter to Peking addressed to the Ministry in charge of the reorganization of the armies saying that during their holidays, they traveled along the border of Indochina and Yunnan. They noticed that the French had established many fortresses

³⁴³ Letter from the Resident Superior, 11 November 1905, TTLTQG1, Gouv Gal 4821.

³⁴⁴ Letter from the Minister for Asian Affairs, 24 January 1905, TTLTQG1, Gouv Gal 4817.

³⁴⁵ Petition from students at the Ecole Pavie, March 1906, TTLTQG1, Gouv Gal 4817.

³⁴⁶ Letter from the governor General, 14 September 1905, TTLTQG1, RST 38099.

³⁴⁷ Order of the Governor General, 16 May 1906, TTLTQG1, Gouv Gal 4817.

and that in the territory of Yunnan, all are along the railroad line...The province of Yunnan is therefore endangered because everyone knows the ambitions of the French. It is necessary to organize a very strong army for the defense of the border.³⁴⁸

The French investigated the incident, spoke to the students en masse, and, while unable to identify the offending party, did manage to determine that the students had received the information second-hand from reading Chinese publications. The Director of the Ecole Pavie attempted to convince the students that France represented no danger to Yunnan, but to no avail: “Chinese, with the mentality that is theirs, will never believe that a Frenchman can, on this point, tell them the truth.”³⁴⁹

Political activism among students at the school did not stop there. A 16-page pamphlet called Yunnan Warning (*Yunnan Jinggao*) circulated through the province in 1906, and French sources were able to trace the anti-French tract back to Ecole Pavie students. The document spoke of the danger posed by the French to Yunnan’s sovereignty, comparing the French in China to the Russians in Manchuria and citing the French in Algeria as proof of French duplicity and savagery.³⁵⁰ Another bulletin, entitled “Advice for Yunnan’s Population,” condemned the way the French grew wealthy as the people of Annam starved. “Annam's realm has been conquered for 20 years. A part of the population has disappeared. At the beginning of the French occupation, the population was not too miserable because the country was not dominated. France was afraid of an uprising and it was important to achieve pacification: peace was advised. Later the population returned to misfortune. Now, all of the dangerous rebels are dead.”³⁵¹ The authors of this piece of propaganda claimed

³⁴⁸ Press Excerpt, 19-20 September 1906, TTLTQG1, Gouv Gal 4817.

³⁴⁹ Letter from the Director of the Ecole Pavie, 25 October 1906, TTLTQG1, Gouv Gal 4817.

³⁵⁰ Yunnan Warning (*Yunnan Jinggao*), date unknown, TTLTQG1, Gouv Gal 4817.

³⁵¹ Advice for Yunnan’s Population, date unknown, TTLTQG1, Gouv Gal 4817.

to be students in Hanoi; once more, the Ecole Pavie was implicated in anti-French agitation.

The French government quickly realized that the difficulties that they were having with Ecole Pavie students paled in comparison to the problems facing Yunnanese authorities. In 1908, with no explanation, Yunnanese officials informed the Governor General that it would no longer be possible to send a new class from the province to the Ecole Pavie. After a bit of confusion, the French Vice-Consul in Yunnan met privately with the Provincial Treasurer³⁵² who explained why Si-Léang, Yunnan's Provincial Governor, had ordered that no more students be sent to the school.

These pupils, after ending their studies at the Ecole Pavie, were, upon their return, the cause of real difficulties for the authorities in the schools that they entered or the places in which they live. They have not stopped provoking unfortunate unrest, either by means of public or private speeches, or by wanting to get involved in local affairs and in international issues by [writing and distributing] pamphlets or by making charges [against those] high authorities. This revolutionary spirit, said the Treasurer, is not any less dangerous because it hampers local administrations and it risks compromising international relations.³⁵³

At first, the sudden decision of the Yunnan government to stop patronizing the school seemed to have taken the French Government aback; however, it is also clear that the French were aware of the many problems being caused in China by Ecole Pavie students. As previously discussed, at least three different sets of lengthy and detailed pamphlets full of anti-French propaganda and written by Ecole Pavie students circulated throughout Yunnan in late 1905 and early 1906 alone. Additionally, the Head of Indochina's Political Bureau was personally aware of the involvement of

³⁵² A man with the surname, Chen

³⁵³ Letter from the French Vice-Consul assigned to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Yunnan, 21 March 1908, TTLTQG1, Gouv Gal 4815.

Ecole Pavie students in revolutionary activities propagated by one of the most dangerous opponents of the Qing dynasty. “Antidynastic and revolutionary sentiments professed by these students are not in doubt; during the Nam-Quan fort escapade, three of them were convinced to travel to Lang Son, at least, with Sun Yat Sen and his companions.”³⁵⁴ When Ecole Pavie graduates became implicated in revolutionary forays involving the future father of the Chinese Republic, the threat they posed to Yunnan’s provincial mandarins could not be ignored. In the end, the scandal over political unrest fomented by former students signaled the death knell for the unique, if short-lived, school.

The Ecole Pavie was officially disbanded by an order of the Governor General dated 11 July 1908.³⁵⁵ The reasons behind the institute’s abrupt closure are complex, but fundamentally, even though the French had previously bandied around the idea of closing the school, the ultimate decision came from China, and its meaning was unmistakable. Yunnan authorities would no longer send students from their province to the Ecole Pavie. Only two solutions remained: send all of the students back to Yunnan immediately, or let them enroll in a Normal School in Hanoi that accepted foreign Asiatics for the rest of the school year.³⁵⁶ The Viceroy of Yunnan agreed to let the students return immediately on two conditions. First, that the fall tuition already

³⁵⁴ Letter from the Head of the Political Bureau, 28 April 1908, TTLTQG1, Gouv Gal 4815. This quote refers to the rather mysterious events that transpired at the French post in Nam Quan, when a band of revolutionaries, allegedly accompanied by Sun Yat-sen, were involved in some unrest along the Sino-Tonkin border. Details of the actual “escapade” are unclear, but the important part of this anecdote concerns the connection between graduates of the Ecole Pavie and Sun Yat-sen, a relationship that clearly implies the close ties of some Ecole Pavie students with China’s most radical figures. The fact that this whole episode predates the 1911 revolution meant that Sino-French relations could have easily been jeopardized had the crippled Imperial Chinese regime determined that a French colony bore responsibility for offering sanctuary to one of the Empire’s most eloquent critics.

³⁵⁵ Order of the Governor General, 11 July 1908, TTLTQG1, Gouv Gal 4815.

³⁵⁶ Telegram from the Governor General to Yunnan and Mongtseu, no date (1908), TTLTQG1, Gouv Gal 4815.

paid to the French be returned to Yunnan's government, and second, that if the students could not afford the return fare of 50 taels per person, that the Government General of Indochina advance them the money, which would later be reimbursed to it.³⁵⁷ Thus, with a brief bureaucratic squabble over finances, the school was closed.

In a confidential letter sent to the Governor General, the Head of Indochina's Political Bureau condemned the entire Ecole Pavie venture as a disastrous failure.

As a matter of fact, the Ecole Pavie did not produce any of the hoped-for results: intended especially to develop French influence in Yunnan, most of the pupils that it educated gave evidence, afterwards, of their hostility towards France; intended to contribute to the development of friendly relations between France and China, it threatens to become, on the contrary, a source of difficulties because of the revolutionary spirit that moves the students.³⁵⁸

Despite the early success of the Ecole Pavie in attracting the attention of southern China's ranking mandarins, in another major respect, the school was a failure. It never managed, despite several attempts, to recruit students successfully from wealthy Chinese merchant families with ties to Indochina. Had it shifted gears to allow admittance to those types of students, it might possible have managed to maintain a less politically charged environment. With a dramatically larger pool of prospective students, it also would have had less trouble attracting a complete enrollment from year to year.

In spite of these failings, though, efforts to educate Chinese in French style schools continued unabated. In fact, I would like to suggest that the failure of the Ecole Pavie, combined with the support and cooperation of Cochinchina's Chinese notables, eventually allowed for the emergence of a school that did not fail, but

³⁵⁷ Telegram from Yunnan's Minister of Foreign Affairs to the Governor General, 3 August 1908, TTLTQG1, Gouv Gal 4815.

³⁵⁸ Letter from the Head of the Political Bureau, 28 April 1908, TTLTQG1, Gouv Gal 4815.

stalwartly endured right up until the collapse of the French regime in 1954. This school was known as the Lycée Franco-Chinois. Colonial attention turned to the fledgling Lycée Franco-chinois as the bearer of French hopes for shifting the minds of young Chinese students towards the French and away from both the English and the Japanese, who were so much better positioned geographically for accessing the Chinese educational market. This idea gains further credence when one considers that the school's native-place ties with Fujian were quite strong and that the school's Board of Directors, along with the general government, recruited quite heavily from places like Amoy and Fuzhou – a region where English influence was less evident than in Canton, and hopes for French success could be higher.

While the Indochinese University did not come to be, the English plan to open their own universities in China gradually morphed into a plan to open the Chinese University of Hong Kong. French Colonial authorities were already distressed by the fact that wealthy Chinese in Cochinchina educated their sons in English secondary schools and they tried to figure out a way to consolidate French influence in Asia, particularly in Indochina and among the merchant Chinese. This was the primary colonial justification for establishing the Franco-Chinese Secondary School in Cholon, or the Lycée Franco-Chinois; however, the Lycée Franco-Chinois is significant within the Chinese community as well. For Cholon's Chinese, and arguably for the Chinese throughout Cochinchina, the Lycée Franco-Chinois was one of the crown jewels, not only of Sino-French cooperation, but of inter-congregational cooperation as well.

In 1907, Charles Hardouin, the Chief of the Governor-General's Cabinet, had undertaken a mission to China in which he publicized the French intention to create a secondary school for Chinese pupils in Cholon. Plans for the Franco-Chinese Secondary School accelerated quite rapidly in the months following Hardouin's exploratory trip. That the French were integrally involved in the planning and

implementation of the Franco-Chinese Secondary School cannot be denied; however, the early efforts for the establishment of a modern, Western school for Chinese students came from other sources in addition to the French. In fact, as early as December of 1907, a group of Chinese merchants living in Cholon established an association whose sole purpose was to create a school that would “give the Chinese children a modern education.”³⁵⁹ These same Chinese merchants even commissioned a French notary, Mr. Gigon-Papin, to investigate the feasibility of such an institution.³⁶⁰ With such proactive support from the Chinese community in Cholon, the colonial government quickly agreed to facilitate the creation of the Franco-Chinese Secondary School.

The desire for a French school expressed by Cholon’s notable Chinese proved to be a much-desired lifeline for the colonial administration. On January 27, 1908, colonial authorities met in a general assembly at which they appointed a Board of Directors for the as-yet-unformed school. Six members of this Board, including the first President of the Board, Mr. Schneegans, were European; the other twelve members, including the first vice-president of the Board, Mr. Ta-Mah-Yan, were notable Chinese businessmen and heads of the four major Chinese congregations (*bang*).³⁶¹ On February 10, 1908, about two weeks after the creation of the school’s Board of Directors, the new company received its official seal of approval when the Lieutenant Governor of Cochinchina, Mr. Bonhoure, endorsed the establishment of both the Association and the school it sought to create.³⁶² Three years later, the joint committee of Chinese and Frenchmen got their project underway.

³⁵⁹ Note No°1317 G, 16 January 1912, CAOM, INDO GGI 44042

³⁶⁰ Note No°1317 G, 16 January 1912, CAOM, INDO GGI 44042

³⁶¹ Note No°1317 G, 16 January 1912, CAOM, INDO GGI 44042. The four congregations represented on the Board of Directors of the Franco-Chinese Secondary School were Canton (Canton), Fujian (Fou-kien or Phuc-kien), Chaozhou (Trieu Chau), and Hainan (Hainam).

³⁶² Note No°1317 G, 16 January 1912, CAOM, INDO GGI 44042.

When petitioning the French government for a subsidy to meet the school's budget shortfall, the President of the committee commented on the early days of the Association, writing that its purpose

was to create, in the most important Chinese center of the Colony, an establishment similar to those which had already existed for several years in Hong Kong, Shanghai, and Singapore, where well-to-do Chinese based in Indochina had not hesitated, despite the relatively high expense, to send their children. These [children], their studies completed, returned to us educated like the English and speaking English exclusively. It seemed that it would be possible to keep [those students] in Indochina by offering the same education, but in French.³⁶³

By highlighting the ever-present competition with Great Britain, the Association of the Franco-Chinese Secondary School managed to maintain the interest and support of the colonial administration throughout the early years of its existence, not a mean feat considering that the school ran with a perpetual budget shortfall and required significant yearly subsidies in order to continue its operations.

When considering the local value of an institution like the Lycée Franco-Chinois, it is important to remember the depth of penetration of congregational schools into rural areas. All regions of Indochina maintained Chinese-run, congregationally-supported elementary schools for local Chinese children. The flight to foreign schools and universities only affected the best and the brightest of Chinese pupils, those destined for higher education. By establishing a Chinese secondary school in Cholon, the French, with the help and cooperation of the Chinese congregations, had gone a long way towards obviating the need for travel to Hong Kong or Canton for further education.³⁶⁴

³⁶³ Letter to the Governor General from the President of the Association du Lycée Franco-chinois, 8 May 1912, CAOM, INDO GGI 44042.

³⁶⁴ Letter from the President of Cholon's Municipal Council, 29 June 1922, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.8/056(8).

Despite their stalwart support of the endeavor, it would be incorrect to assume that the Colonial government bore the primary pecuniary responsibility for building and operating the school. After Lieutenant-Governor Bonhoure approved the establishment of the Association of the Franco-Chinese Secondary School,³⁶⁵ the association called upon the European and Chinese communities in Saigon and Cholon to pledge financial support to the school. The resulting signatures promised a sum of \$159,160 piastres, only \$15,160 piastres of which were paid by European donors. The remaining \$144,000 piastres of the initial sum collected came directly from members of Cholon's Chinese community. Prompted by the generosity of the network of Chinese businessmen based in Cholon and no doubt relieved that wealthy Chinese youth would no longer be required to seek education from the English, the French General Government added its own donation of \$20,000 piastres to the amount collected by the Board of Directors.³⁶⁶

Although technically in the town of Cholon, the proposed site for the school actually sat on the border between Cholon and Saigon, offering easy access to Chinese pupils from both cities. The Colonial Government, led by Governor General Beau, donated a substantial tract of land to the Association for the construction of the school's facilities, and the Governor General himself placed the first stone of the new school on February 26, 1908. At the ceremony marking the commencement of construction, five of the Chinese founders of the secondary school were awarded the distinguished Decoration of State Education³⁶⁷ for their efforts on behalf of the new institution of learning.³⁶⁸ During the period of construction, the Board of Directors

³⁶⁵ The *Association du Lycée Franco-Chinois* still exists today with a membership composed primarily of students who graduated from the institution in the 1950's and 1960's.

³⁶⁶ Note No°1317 G, 16 January 1912, CAOM, INDO GGI 44042.

³⁶⁷ They were awarded "les palmes de l'Instruction Publique" by the French authorities.

³⁶⁸ Note No°1317 G, 16 January 1912, CAOM, INDO GGI 44042.

desired that the school commence operations despite the lack of suitable facilities. To that end, the Board sought temporary space in which to house and teach the students and their professors. Once again, the Chinese community came up with a solution to the dilemma of space when the Fujian Congregation volunteered the use of their pagoda in Cholon to the students and faculty of the school until the school's actual building was completed. The association quickly accepted this generous offer and the Franco-Chinese Secondary School sprang to life.³⁶⁹

On April 7, 1909, Governor General Klobukowski addressed the assembled students and an audience of French and Chinese dignitaries during an ornate ceremony at the Phuoc Kien pagoda, the temporary site for the newly inaugurated school. In his speech, he spoke little of education and his hopes for the school's success; rather, he delivered a stern address with heavy political overtones. Discussing the long relationship between China and Indochina, Klobukowski warned the Chinese to remain obedient to local laws, saying,

Indochina has always welcomed [the Chinese] warmly and has given them the greatest opportunities to work. [Here] they are entitled to appeal either to indigenous statutes or to French law. Therefore, the Colonial Government counts it as absolutely required that [the Chinese] always remain respectful of the regulations and of the laws which ensure a privileged position for them in Indochina. That is why their absolute and complete loyalty can be claimed.³⁷⁰

In his speech, Klobukowski goes on to acknowledge the fundamental condition of the Chinese community in Indochina. They consistently participate in the commerce, labor, and communities of Saigon and Cholon, but the French doubt their loyalty and commitment to the governing bodies of Vietnam, fearing instead that the numerous

³⁶⁹ No°394ster, letter from Governor General Klobukowski to the Minister of Colonies in Paris, 12 April 1909, CAOM, INDO GGI 44042.

³⁷⁰ N°394ster, letter to the Minister of Colonies, 12 April 1909, CAOM, INDO GGI 20046.

Chinese citizens in Indochina remain loyal only to China, and to their political and economic interests there. The political climate in Indochina at the time goes a long way towards contextualizing this speech. The Vietnamese peasant uprising of 1908, the closing of the University of Hanoi, and a number of similar incidents had served to darken considerably the colonial mood, a mistrust clearly conveyed in the severe and stern nature of Klobukowski's address.

Despite his 1909 seriousness, Klobukowski himself generally supported Chinese organizations in Indochina³⁷¹ and the Franco-Chinese Secondary School proved to be no exception to this unwritten policy, but he expected something more than good stewardship in return for the financial support of the colonial authority, as the above passage from his speech indicates. In fact, what was perceived as his permissive attitude towards the Chinese population of Indochina led to quite a bit of friction within the administration, and on occasion, scathing letters of protest were sent to the Minister of Colonies in Paris, who then required explanations of and even defenses for Klobukowski's decisions. The subsidy granted to the Franco-Chinese Secondary School by Klobukowski's administration was just one of a number of issues for which the Minister of Colonies demanded justification.³⁷² The financial pressure that the administration faced from Paris also shines through in the speech Klobukowski gave at the opening of the school, in which he urged the school's Board of directors to adhere to the "the strictest economy in the construction of this establishment. Needless use of luxury is not preferable to reserving the collected

³⁷¹ Klobukowski's administration presided over the creation of a number of Chinese institutions, including the Franco-Chinese Secondary School and the Chinese Chamber of Commerce of Cholon. Although Klobukowski himself might have resisted the creation of some of these institutions, the very fact that a number of them emerged during his tenure as Governor General indicates that he was considerably more receptive to such non-native organizations than some of the Governors General who came before and after him.

³⁷² No 848bp, Rapport from the Governor General p.i. to the Minister of Colonies in Paris, 8 June 1911, CAOM, INDO GGI 50950.

capital sums necessary for the normal functioning of [the school] for one or two years.”³⁷³

The school’s builders paid heed to Klobukowski’s plea for economy. Construction of the school building only cost \$109,800 piastres, considerably short of the \$179,160 piastres that had been raised by the Board in its initial collection; however, the remaining funds quickly dwindled with the purchasing of furniture, educational supplies and books that had to be ordered from France, equipment for the dining halls, and so on. The financial shortfall was exacerbated by the rather inefficient fact that the pupils cost more money to keep, feed, and educate than they brought to the school in the form of tuition and board. By 1912, when the Board of Directors decided to install electricity in the new building (at the cost of \$10,000 piastres for the entire project) the school’s financial struggles had become abundantly clear.³⁷⁴

In fact, the most serious issue challenging the success of the school concerned its irregular funding, a problem so severe that it once actually halted the operation of the institution for several months in 1917. Financial woes beset the school as early as 1911, when, before the institution was even operational, \$10,000 pledged to support its operation were lost due to the unexpected bankruptcy of one of the Chinese businesses that had pledged to support it. The surplus money from the founding of the school had been exhausted by 1914. The closure of 1917 represented a real low point for the institution, but in 1918, the French stepped in to subsidize the running of the place. These subsidies took many varied forms, including large donations of funds levied by the congregations from the Chinese community³⁷⁵ and various supplements

³⁷³ No 394ster, Letter to the Minister of Colonies, 12 April 1909, CAOM, INDO GGI 22046.

³⁷⁴ Note No 1317 G, 16 January 1912, CAOM, INDO GGI 44042.

³⁷⁵ In 1922, the Chinese community offered \$80,000 piastres towards maintaining the institution.

donated by the Government of Cochinchina.³⁷⁶ In fact, the most consistent source of funding enjoyed by the school in the 1920's was money funneled to the school out of the amounts paid to France by the Chinese government as part of the reparations remaining from the Boxer Rebellion.³⁷⁷

These funding problems were not alleviated until the President of Cholon's Municipal Council had the inspired idea to add 5 cents to the taxes paid by each of Cholon's Chinese merchants and businessmen, money that was to go directly into the Lycée's budget. Cholon's Chinese Chamber of Commerce welcomed a solution that was at once simple and effective, but not too onerous for smaller businessmen to bear.

³⁷⁸ In fact, the Chinese Chamber of Commerce and the leaders of Cholon's congregations felt that an increased tax would present fewer problems for them than had the old method of laboriously collecting pledges from the entire Chinese community.³⁷⁹ The only major complaint was that Cholon merchants bore the brunt of a tax that was used to support a school that was attended by Chinese from all across Cochinchina and Cambodia. Even more off-putting to Cholon's Chinese, Saigon's Chinese community members were also not initially subject to taxation.³⁸⁰ After a complaint by the President of Cholon's Municipal Council, the government reexamined the taxation notion. With the endorsement of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce and of the Chinese congregations of Saigon and Cholon, the Cochinchinese government extended the tax to include all Chinese residents of

³⁷⁶ Letter from the President of Cholon's Municipal Council, 29 June 1922, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.8/056(8).

³⁷⁷ Letter from the Governor General, 2 May 1923, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.8/284(12).

³⁷⁸ Circular from the Governor of Cochinchina, 13 June 1923, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.8/056(8).

³⁷⁹ Letter from Yip Pak Ky, the President of Cholon's Chinese Chamber of Commerce, 19 June 1922, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.8/056(8).

³⁸⁰ Letter from the President of Cholon's Municipal Council, 27 October 1922, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.8/056(8).

Cochinchina.³⁸¹ With the combined money from taxes and the Boxer Reparations, the school could finally keep its financial head above the water.

This solution offers insight into one of the most fundamental realities of the congregation system. In Indochina's hierarchy of Chinese congregations, the congregations in Cholon sat unchallenged at the top; Saigon's congregations were just a small step below. Thus, when the Chinese community in Cholon felt that something was unfair, the French government, as in this case, paid attention. This is not meant to imply, by any means, that the French always capitulated to Cholon's Chinese; rather, a strong opinion voiced by that Chinese community guaranteed at least a hearing from the French. The second point worthy of note is that when the united congregations of Cholon and Saigon agreed to measures such as a Cochinchina-wide tax increase to support the Lycée Franco-chinois, the opinions of smaller congregations outside of the city were irrelevant. In this case, the congregations' decision was certainly not capricious. The institution of the new tax guaranteed the school a source of funding that would remain as long as Chinese remained in Indochina to attend the institution.

The connections between the Lycée Franco-Chinois and the Chinese congregations also warrant closer attention. Statutes published in 1908 by the Lycée Franco-Chinois are essentially a list of all of the very prominent Chinese businessmen. Phong Nhut, Cantonese congregation president and future president of Cholon's Chinese Chamber of Commerce, appears on the list, as does another familiar name: Ly Dang. In fact, Ly Dang's appearance here suggests an answer to a bit of a Lycée mystery. Ly Dang's name appears as a founding member of the institution on the published statutes from 1908.³⁸² By 1914, he is no longer listed as a member of the school's council,³⁸³ because his bankruptcy had already led to his return to China. The

³⁸¹ Circular from the governor of Cochinchina, 13 June 1923, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.8/056(8).

³⁸² Statutes of the Lycée Franco-Chinois, 20 December 1907, CAOM, INDO GGI 44039.

³⁸³ Minutes from the meeting of the Administrative Council, 23 July 1914, CAOM, INDO GGI 44043.

fact that a prominent businessman went bankrupt and cost the school \$10,000 piastres in pledges sometime after 1911, and the fact that Ly Dang was a prominent businessman and council member who went bankrupt after 1911 but before 1914, although circumstantial, seems to indicate that he was the bankrupt businessman in question.

For the French, the high degree of Chinese involvement in the affairs of the Lycée spoke favorably about the institution. From one perspective, the Lycée largely avoided the anti-French sentiments and revolutionary inclinations that had doomed the Ecole Pavie. By enrolling students who were personally invested in Indochina by virtue of family ties, the risk of radical reformism and generally xenophobia was greatly reduced. As the head of the school's council wrote,

You will doubtless consider with us that the question of the education to be given to the Chinese upper class is not only educational, but above all, political. Our neighbors in Hong-Kong have consented to large sacrifices to drain the intellectual Chinese elite, and it would be certainly annoying if the Chinese businessmen of the Colony were forced to send their children to British territory to receive an education for which no need was foreseen in Indochina, except for our establishment.³⁸⁴

From the Chinese perspective, this school also seems to have been a success. Books and pamphlets commemorating various classes and reunions at the school were still being published well into the 1950's, a clear indication of the institution's longevity.

Conclusion

By the mid-1920's, Frequent French refusal to allow political activism in the form of commemorations and demonstrations led to open Chinese resistance to colonial prohibitions. During annual commemorations of the Marco Polo Bridge

³⁸⁴ Letter from the President of the Lycée Franco Chinois Council, 8 May 1912, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.9/142(2).

incident, local French authorities refused to give congregations permission to hang national flags to commemorate the day, but they could not prevent individual Chinese from closing their shops, wearing crepe armbands, and distributing flyers on a massive scale.³⁸⁵ In Saigon and Cholon, in addition to business closings, as many as 10,000 Chinese from all of the congregations paraded through the Chinese Consulate in Saigon from 7 o'clock in the morning to 5 o'clock in the afternoon, paying their respects to a hanging portrait of Sun Yat Sen.³⁸⁶

While politicized cultural activities occasioned friction, French and Chinese leaders found common ground over the issue of education. French officials were concerned about the flight of Indochina's best and brightest overseas Chinese pupils to foreign schools and universities. By establishing a Chinese secondary school in Cholon, the French, with the help and cooperation of the Chinese congregations, went a long way towards obviating the need for Chinese students to travel to Hong Kong or Canton for further education. Education in Indochina benefited both the French and the Chinese by creating a class of overseas Chinese pupil that was fluent in French, presumably friendly to French interests, and able to interact successfully with colonial authorities; however, when confronted with funding, colonial imperatives once again carried the day. Despite their stalwart support of the endeavor, the overseas Chinese community itself still bore the primary pecuniary responsibility for building and operating the school.

³⁸⁵ Letter from the Administrator of Bac Lieu, 8 July 1938, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IIA.45/254(4).

³⁸⁶ Intelligence Report on Chinese activities, 8 July 1938, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IIA.45/254(4).

CHAPTER 7: FINDING THE MIDDLE GROUND: DISPUTE RESOLUTION AND MEDIATION IN THE CONGREGATIONS

As the only officially recognized representatives of Indochina's Chinese communities, congregations assumed a prominent role as mediators for their members. This mediation took multiple forms; congregations interceded on behalf of their members with French authorities, local indigenous administrators, or even other congregations. This intercession might occur in a Vietnamese village, in the capital of the Chinese province from which the supplicant hailed, or even in the halls of Paris's Ministry for Foreign Affairs, but wherever arbitration occurred, it was likely to concern one of two matters: immigration or commerce.

The following chapter of this dissertation addresses issues of immigration, crime, and expulsion; it will focus largely upon mediation as it involved financial or commercial issues. To that end, our discussion shall center upon two types of mediation: domestic mediation, between Chinese and indigenous communities or simply between two or more conflicting Chinese communities; and international mediation. This last might include Chinese mediation with the French Government General, Chinese mediation with French government in Paris, or even Chinese mediation with Chinese high officials or French consuls in Chinese native places, most frequently Amoy or Canton.

Domestic Political Mediation

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Chinese mercantile success in Indochina made Chinese businesses easy targets for indigenous agitation, especially in rural areas of the colony. In the early 1920s, a spate of anti-Chinese activities in Vinh Long province led the Chinese congregations to appeal to the French for protection and defense. On November 25, 1922, two local Annamite students went to the "Kouang An" shop,

owned by local Chinese merchant Luong Huru,³⁸⁷ to inquire into the purchase of a padlock. One student bought a padlock for 40 cents and was given the key; the other allegedly stole a padlock and then returned to the store later in the day to demand the key. The Chinese store employee told the student he could have the key if he paid his 40 cents. The student, infuriated, hurled insults at the man and threatened to return with his classmates to take his revenge upon the store. Shortly thereafter, a small mob of indigenous students returned to harass the salesman and to throw rocks at the store, threatening the salesman and the merchandise. Only after the arrival of the police did the students stop their assault on the store.³⁸⁸

Unfortunately, the confrontation did not end there. Four days later, on November 29, the students returned en masse, this time led by an indigenous professor from their school. This second attack, committed by around 50 students,³⁸⁹ occurred in the early morning, around 7 am, and left the shop windows shattered and much merchandise destroyed. Particularly shocked by the involvement of the professor in this affair, the Chinese wrote, “The Annamite professor, scornful of the most basic laws, personally went to assist the actions of his students, provoking the disturbance at the shop in Vinh Long.”³⁹⁰ While the exact cause of the disgruntlement of the Vietnamese students in this case cannot be determined, the early 1920’s in Cochinchina were characterized by the frequent exhortations made by prominent Vietnamese working in the French administration to boycott Chinese goods and

³⁸⁷ Letter from the Administrator of Vinh Long, 2 December 1922, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IB.30/024(4).

³⁸⁸ Letter from the Congregation leaders of Vinh Long, 2 December 1922, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IB.30/024(4).

³⁸⁹ Letter from the Administrator of Vinh Long, 2 December 1922, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IB.30/024(4).

³⁹⁰ Letter from the Congregation leaders of Vinh Long, 2 December 1922, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IB.30/024(4).

services. These anti-Chinese boycotts were supported by a number of prominent groups, including Bui Quang Trieu and his Vietnamese Constitutionalists.

These were not the first incidents that had occurred in Vinh Long. Previously, in 1919, the store of Hainanese merchant Ouei Nam Hing had been attacked. In 1920, shopkeeper Du Thang of the Trieu Chau congregation fell victim to a similar scheme. For local merchants, the uproar at the Kuoang An shop was the last straw; thus, in December of 1922, the leaders of all five of Vinh Long's Chinese congregations sent a formal letter of complaint to the Chinese Chamber of Commerce in Cholon, asking for them to intercede with the French government on their behalf.³⁹¹ The Chinese Chamber of Commerce immediately forwarded the petition of Vinh Long's congregation presidents to the Governor of Cochinchina,³⁹² who, as chance would have it, had already received a report from Vinh Long's administrator, warning him that he was likely to hear of the incident because Vinh Long's Chinese merchants had reached the end of their patience. "The pupils took advantage of [this incident] to vent feelings of hostility which exist here against the Chinese, feelings that have shown themselves repeatedly and in similar ways these past years."³⁹³

The repeat attack came as no surprise to the local police, who had stationed an officer near the shop after the original November 25 incident to prevent just such local retaliation; however, when the students returned in such large numbers, the policeman was frightened by them and did nothing to intervene. The policeman, apparently an habitual opium smoker with a record of past failings, was dismissed by the provincial

³⁹¹ Letter from the Congregation leaders of Vinh Long, 2 December 1922, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IB.30/024(4).

³⁹² Letter from Cholon's Chinese Chamber of Commerce, 4 December 1922, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IB.30/024(4).

³⁹³ Letter from the Administrator of Vinh Long, 2 December 1922, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IB.30/024(4). Although the administrator acknowledges the presence of these anti-Chinese sentiments, he offers no specific explanation as to their origins or source.

administrator. In the end, the Administrator ordered the Director of the Vinh Long School to open an inquiry into the attacks and to publicize any punishments that resulted from the investigation. Also, as a means of placating the frustrated local Chinese businessmen, the town of Long Châu paid an indemnity to the beleaguered Luong Huru that was intended to recompense him for his troubles.³⁹⁴

In addition to dealing with indigenous conflicts, congregations could appeal to the French on matters concerning intra-congregational conflicts as well. Inevitably, congregations were not above internal rivalries and petty acts of vengeance for real and imagined social or business slights. In these situations, Chinese congregation leaders could use their subordinate positions relative to the French administration to get rid of hated competitors and enemies. The mere suspicion of malfeasance, if whispered into the appropriate colonial ear, could result in a man's expulsion from the colony and the ensuing loss of most, if not all, of his property and interests there; however, small congregations away from the Saigon-Cholon metropolitan center could themselves be embarrassed if a big urban congregation chose to dispute the regional congregation's claims. One such incident involved the fate of Tran Phut, a Cantonese man from Soc Trang.

On July 21, 1887, the leader of Soc Trang's Cantonese congregation sent a letter to Mr. Masse, the French administrator of Soc Trang, requesting the expulsion from the Colony of one Tran Phut, whose crimes, among other things, included general allegations of rabble-rousing and unsavoriness of character. In the letter, the congregation's president himself confessed to being unable to remember many of the details surrounding Tran Phut's misdeeds, but he, on behalf of the Cantonese leaders and shopkeepers of Soc Trang, still insisted that the man be expelled from Soc Trang

³⁹⁴ Letter from the Administrator of Vinh Long, 2 December 1922, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IB.30/024(4).

“in order to set a good example for [the region’s] Chinese inhabitants.”³⁹⁵ Upon hearing reports of a near-vagabond fomenting unrest in his district, Masse made a hasty investigation of Tran and sent a letter off to Saigon, imploring the Director of the Interior to expel him from the Colony unless, of course, he felt inclined to intern him at Poulo Condore.³⁹⁶

Somehow, whether through French or Chinese contacts is unknown, the Cantonese congregations of Saigon and Cholon discovered Tran’s plight and quickly rushed to his aid, writing a letter detailing his years in the region and his immense respectability. No less than 18 major businessmen and congregation leaders from Saigon and Cholon signed this letter defending the character of the hapless prisoner.³⁹⁷ Cochinchina’s Cantonese establishments had known Tran Phut for many years. In the 1860’s, he had lived in Cambodia where he operated a successful business in Phnom Penh. Unfortunately, his business eventually faltered and he was forced to close shop. Moving away from Phnom Penh, Tran eventually settled in the village of Bai Xau in Soc Trang province where he opened an opium shop and married an Annamite woman with whom he had at least two children.³⁹⁸ The urban congregations trusted Tran completely and had over the years extended him a nearly limitless line of credit for his business ventures, trust that, according to the congrégations, was never betrayed. In fact, the urban Congrégations blamed the whole expulsion affair on the jealousy and hatred of some Soc Trang Chinese who bore false witness against Tran and had him arrested out of spite. They implored the French administration to consider the plight

³⁹⁵ Petition from Cantonese Congrégation President to French Administrator in Soc Trang, 21 July 1887, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA 15.155(27).

³⁹⁶ Letter No. 756 from Mr. Masse, the Administrator of Soc Trang, to the Director of the Interior in Saigon, 23 July 1887, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA 15.155(27).

³⁹⁷ Petition from the leaders of the Cantonese congregations of Saigon and Cholon to Saigon’s Director of the Interior, 1 August 1887, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA 15.155(27).

³⁹⁸ Petition from the leaders of the Cantonese congregations of Saigon and Cholon to Saigon’s Director of the Interior, 1 August 1887, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA 15.155(27).

of Tran's family, to consider the source of the alleged accusations, and to consider the honorability of those vouching for his character.³⁹⁹

Not surprisingly, the French chose to question Tran firsthand to determine the truth. Under interrogation at Saigon's Central Prison, Tran explained that the leader of the Soc Trang congregation was very angry with him, because in 1886, Tran had vouched for several Chinese imprisoned for being members of a secret society. The Administrator eventually released the men and the Soc Trang president had not forgiven Tran for his interference.⁴⁰⁰ After questioning Tran, Tourillon, Saigon's police superintendent, recommended that Tran be allowed to stay in the Colony, although he suggested that the man be required to move from Soc Trang to avoid future troubles. Justifying his recommendation, Tourillon cited the respectability of Tran's character witnesses, adding that a more severe punishment could be dispensed later "should this Chinese prove himself unworthy of the administration's leniency."⁴⁰¹ As no order of expulsion is included in Tran's dossier, it is probably safe to assume that the superintendent's recommendation was accepted and Tran was allowed to remain in Cochinchina.

This incident is illuminating in two respects. First, it stands as a shining example of the way congregations could use French decrees to eliminate rivals in the region. In fact, the imposition of an entire code of laws upon the Chinese community by an outside authority arguably empowered local Chinese leaders by providing them with the powerful weapon of expulsion to be wielded as necessary to purge undesirable members. The act of appealing directly to the French nicely bypassed any

³⁹⁹ Petition from the leaders of the Cantonese congregations of Saigon and Cholon to Saigon's Director of the Interior, 1 August 1887, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA 15.155(27).

⁴⁰⁰ Interrogation of Tran Phut at Saigon's Central Prison, 2 August 1887, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA 15.155(27).

⁴⁰¹ Letter No. 478 from Tourillon, Superintendent of Police, to the Director of the Interior in Saigon, 3 August 1887, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA 15.155(27).

internal mediation within the Chinese community, thus ensuring that formal negotiations with an assigned Chinese arbiter would not interfere with the elimination of an enemy. In the case of Tran Phut, this plan failed because of the willingness of the Cholon and Saigon congregations to intervene on his behalf; however, one can safely assume that few Chinese based in rural regions boasted the loyal friends and powerful connections necessary to salvage their Indochinese interests when condemned by local French authorities. In fact, if one looks closely at Tran's story, it seems possible that the president of the Soc Trang congregation had resorted to false accusations in the past to rid himself of enemies or competitors. Certainly Tran Phut seemed to imply that this was the case when he explained the reasons underlying the animosity between him and the congregational authorities.⁴⁰²

Second, this incident serves to highlight an unwritten rule of Indochina's congregations. Congregational authority adhered to a strict pecking order, with rural congregations subordinate to urban ones and the congregations of Saigon and Cholon dominant over all. This dominance is less clear in the case of Tonkin, where distance inevitably decreased the effective reach of the great Chinese centers to the south, but for Cochinchina and Cambodia, word from Cholon, and to a slightly lesser degree, Saigon, was law. French edicts did not explicitly enforce this hierarchy, but the tendency to apply justice along terms of mutual responsibility, as seen previously with the example of the Trieu Chau congregation's involvement in the secret society uprisings of 1882, implicitly reinforced the authority of Cholon and Saigon by making rural activities directly relevant to urban financial interests. Additionally, as the final verdict indicates, the French authorities in Saigon completely disregarded the accusations of the Cantonese president in Soc Trang, instead using the information

⁴⁰² Interrogation of Tran Phut at Saigon's Central Prison, 2 August 1887, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA 15.155(27).

provided by the wealthy and extremely powerful Cantonese congregations of Cholon and Saigon to determine the truth.

Commerce and Trade

Issues of commerce and trade were certain to pique the interest of overseas Chinese communities and equally sure to elicit a quick Chinese response if they impacted the normal operational patterns of Chinese businesses in Indochina. Examples of this sort of dispute abound, and congregational intervention on behalf of their members occurred quite frequently. In 1911, for example, the presidents of the Hainam, Trieu Chau, and Phuoc Kien congregations in Cholon all forwarded letters of complaint to Cochinchina's Lieutenant Governor, protesting the fact that they were held responsible for the taxes from boats that might only pass through their cities once in a month and whose captains certainly felt little need to pay the requisite duties.⁴⁰³ As the following photo indicates, these boats were often small, with shallow drafts and minimal crews who often did not feel the need to follow official French rules when it came to paying taxes and duties on cargo.



Figure 14 Chinese Junk⁴⁰⁴

⁴⁰³ Letters from the Presidents of Cholon's Hainam, Phuoc Kien, and Trieu Chau congregations, 23 June 1911, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.8/012(1).

⁴⁰⁴ <http://images.google.com/imgres?imgurl=http://patrick.guenin.free.fr/indo1930/image/cochin15.jpg&imgrefurl=http://patrick.guenin.free.fr/indo1930/cochin/cochin15.htm&h=322&w=469&sz=50&tbnid=qIYqL1hpytATEM:&tbnh=85&tbnw=125&hl=en&start=10&prev=/images%3Fq%3Dch>. Feb 12, 2006

The congregations faced an extremely serious problem when it came to these boats. Boat captains could easily hide out in the endless maze of canals, tributaries, and tiny waterways that crisscrossed the region and customs officials were extremely unlikely to be able to monitor them successfully, especially if they did not want to be found. If congregation officers never saw these boat captains, they certainly could not collect taxes due from them, but despite this reality, congregations were still responsible for making up the unpaid money. French administrators admitted that the Chinese situation was dire, but they could not agree on a solution to the problem. Correspondence flew furiously back and forth between the Chinese and the various administrators in the Cochinchinese government until a solution was finally reached. Chinese congregations would remain responsible for the unpaid taxes of Chinese boats, but the registry system of boats would be completely revamped in order to allow the customs agencies to keep better track of the comings and goings of these vessels. Additionally, proof of tax payment would be required for any number of business transactions in the colony, a measure intended to encourage captains to pay up in order to avoid penalties and bureaucratic difficulties later.⁴⁰⁵ In this way, the Chinese and French reached an accord that, while perhaps not everything the Chinese might have hoped for, still showed a good faith effort to alleviate the burden placed upon the congregations by delinquent boat captains. As the following picture suggests, the diversity of cargo carried on a typical Chinese ship offered great potential for profit. Many boat captains preferred to pay their taxes and preserve their legitimacy and recourse to colonial protection rather than frittering those safeguards away by becoming delinquent in tax and duty payments.

⁴⁰⁵ Draft of Official Order, no date, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.8/012(1).



Figure 15 Chinese Junks in Cholon⁴⁰⁶

Other financial adjustments made by the French drew severe criticism from Indochina's overseas Chinese. In 1921, for example, the dramatic increase in the business tax, as much as 250% for some merchants, outraged the Chinese community so much that the French offered to review each complaint on a case by case basis to make sure the increases did not overwhelm small and mid-sized businesses.⁴⁰⁷ However, of all of the commercial actions taken by the French, there was one in particular that created an overwhelming backlash in Indochina's overseas Chinese community. This was the move by the French government to require that all accounting and bookkeeping be done in French rather than in Chinese.

Indochina's Chinese, most of whom could not speak French with any level of proficiency, much less read or write it, were completely appalled by this decision which, for most of them, meant that they would have to hire separate translators to manage the conversions of their books into French. The French rationale for this

⁴⁰⁶ <http://images.google.com/imgres?imgurl=http://patrick.guenin.free.fr/indo1930/image/cochin15.jpg&imgrefurl=http://patrick.guenin.free.fr/indo1930/cochin/cochin15.htm&h=322&w=469&sz=50&tbnid=qIYqL1hpytATEM:&tbnh=85&tbnw=125&hl=en&start=10&prev=/images%3Fq%3Dch>. Feb 12, 2006

⁴⁰⁷ Letter from the Lieutenant Governor of Cochinchina, 19 August 1921, CAOM, INDO GGI 16417.

decision was essentially suspicion; by having all accounting done in French, it would be easier for colonial administrators to inspect Chinese accounting and ferret out any attempts to defraud the colonial government. Unlike many of the acts that preceded it, this new French language requirement earned the ire of the Chinese in all five regions of Indochina, who quickly met to discuss the matter and appealed to their various French administrators to defer implementation of this new regulation pending negotiations between the Governor General and Cholon's Chinese Chamber of Commerce.

The Governor General formally supported this regulation for the first time in 1926, and although the Chinese complained that they were not competent in French, the actual requirement demanded accounting in an indigenous language or a language using the Latin alphabet. The Governor General made it clear that this measure was intended primarily to reduce Chinese corruption. "The measure is a general order; however, it will only effect the numerous Chinese businessmen in Indochina because the Japanese, the Siamese, and the Indians ... are generally familiar with the English language – when they do not know ours – and will easily be able to do their accounting in a language using Latin characters."⁴⁰⁸ In fact, the Governor general was well aware of the hardship this new regulation would impose upon Chinese businesses. He suggested a gradual implementation of this plan, starting with the largest companies first, because they could afford to hire accountants, to avoid overstressing small companies that would not be able to afford the extra staffing requirements.⁴⁰⁹

⁴⁰⁸ Letter from the Governor General, 30 April 1926, CAOM, INDO GGI 50691.

⁴⁰⁹ Letter from the Governor General, 30 April 1926, CAOM, INDO GGI 50691.

Despite the Governor general's careful planning, and despite the many examples he gave of similar colonial situations,⁴¹⁰ this proposal went all the way to President of France for approval.⁴¹¹ Within a few weeks, the French President ratified the measure, and all colonial accounting had to be recorded using the Latin alphabet.⁴¹² Eventually, a sort of workable compromise was reached in terms of the on the ground application of the statute. A commission established by the Lieutenant Governor in Cochinchina proffered the suggestion that chartered accountants be used to oversee the conversion and translation of accounts from Chinese to French. These accountants, vetted by local authorities and completely trustworthy, were responsible for all translations and queries related to the Chinese accounts.⁴¹³ Additionally, the translations were limited to the names of the account holders only, although in the case of Chinese companies, company signboards were not sufficient; the French required the actual names of the businessmen underwriting the company.⁴¹⁴

In actuality, it is quite likely that language was not the main stumbling block when it came to Chinese accounting practices. According to historian Robert Gardella, traditional Chinese accounting practices during the Qing dynasty bore little resemblance to the "double entry" methods so valued by Western accountants. Gardella describes a system of multiple ledgers, where, in larger businesses, a certain numerical creativity allowed successful managers to be rewarded more than less successful ones, and where the entire system, cloaked in secrecy, forced a competition between employees and branches that contributed to the owners' overall control.⁴¹⁵ In

⁴¹⁰ Including the 1902 French law promulgated in Madagascar and the 1921 legislation enacted by the Americans in the Philippines

⁴¹¹ Report to the President of the French Republic, 1926, CAOM, INDO GGI 50691.

⁴¹² Decree from the French President, 1926, CAOM, INDO GGI 50691.

⁴¹³ Letter from the Lieutenant Governor, 1 December 1925, CAOM, INDO GGI 50691.

⁴¹⁴ Letter from Saigon's Chamber of Commerce, 21 February 1925, CAOM, INDO GGI 50691.

⁴¹⁵ Robert Gardella, "Squaring Accounts: Commercial Bookkeeping Methods and Capitalist Rationalism in Late Qing and Republican China," *Journal of Asian Studies* 51, no 2 (May 1992), 330.

one respect, Gardella justifies colonial suspicions by describing a flexible, clandestine, and often complicated ledger system that often treated business deals as family arrangements and whose “jungle-like undergrowth unnecessarily complicat[ed] ordinary business operations.”⁴¹⁶ But despite its complicated nature, Gardella asserts that native Chinese and accounting practices during the late Ming and Qing dynasties – and, one presumes, into the Republican period – were more than sufficient to meet the needs of any Chinese business, large or small, were it to be applied rigorously.

The conflict over the language of accounting took nearly 10 years to resolve. The French administration first began to consider the idea after the Americans promulgated a similar law in 1921 in the Philippines. In 1930, Chinese were still protesting the hardship incurred by the statute. In these letters, the frustration of the overseas Chinese shines through quite clearly. With China wracked by civil war, the Chinese Foreign Ministry was either unwilling or unable to intercede on behalf of her citizens overseas.⁴¹⁷ This left Indochina’s Chinese truly on their own...and conducting their accounts in French.

International Political Mediation

While the French might have struggled with issues of Chinese immigration in Tonkin, in Cochinchina, the Chinese came to their own defense over the question of congregational responsibility for expelled Chinese. As early as 1889, the combined presidents of the congregations of Saigon and Cholon protested the French requirement that they pay the head tax due on Chinese expelled from the Colony. The presidents argued that they themselves had already footed the bill for supporting and feeding the mendicant Chinese prior to their expulsion and the congregations had also paid for the passage of these undesirables back to China. The fact that they then owed

⁴¹⁶ Gardella, “Squaring Accounts,” 322, 326.

⁴¹⁷ Letter to Tsouen Hien, 1 May 1930, CAOM, INDO GGI 50691.

basic taxes to the French administration on behalf of these expelled individuals weighed heavily upon them. “The state of our congregations’ capital is not as prosperous because our business has been hard hit these last days.”⁴¹⁸ This incident shows the willingness of overseas Chinese to approach the Governor General directly and with solidarity when they desired a change in colonial laws applicable to their community.

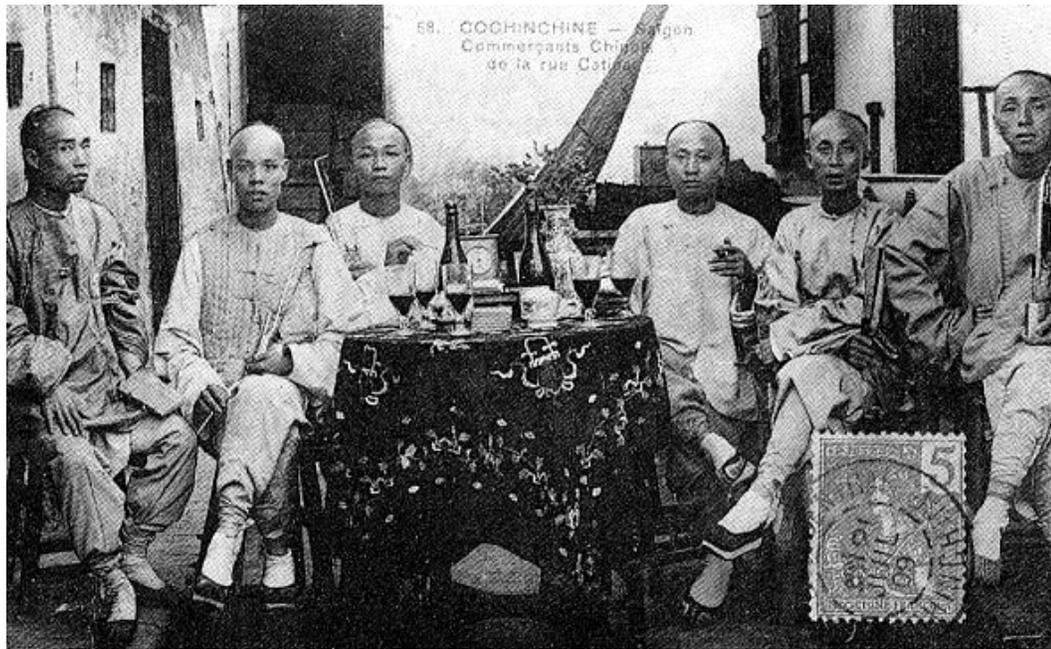


Figure 16 Chinese Merchants⁴¹⁹

Not all complaints sent by overseas Chinese to the Governor General were so simple. In 1903, all of the notable Chinese in Cholon and Saigon sent an eleven-point petition to the Governor General protesting the reception Chinese emigrating into the colony received at the hands of the French. The complaining Chinese quite likely bore some resemblance to those seen in the picture above, financially comfortable, well

⁴¹⁸ Petition from the Chinese Congregation Presidents of Cholon and Saigon, 24 June 1889, CAOM, INDO GGI 22481.

⁴¹⁹ http://images.google.com/imgres?imgurl=http://hinxua.free.fr/autrefois/chinois/Cholon_la_procession_du_dragon.jpg&imgrefurl=http://hinxua.free.fr/autrefois/chinois/photo_chinois_vn.htm&h=457&w=719&sz=97&tbnid=BguALW0gyy0tqM:&tbnh=88&tbnw=139&hl=en&start=2&p. Feb 12, 2006.

groomed, and serious. Their complaints were many and covered all aspects of the process of arrival into the colony. Concerned first with their own congregational coffers, the Chinese protested the continued payment of a revolving tax intended to recompense the French for the construction of the Xom-Chiêu depot along the Saigon River, intended to protect new arrivals from the elements, long after the cost of construction had been recovered.

Points two and three concerned the debarkation of passengers and recovery of their luggage, a period of time during which Vietnamese coolies swarmed new arrivals, jostling for portage rights and creating a scene of chaos, confusion, and frustration. To combat this disorder, the Chinese suggested point number four: the creation of what would essentially be an immigration revenue farm. The Chinese congregations would select among their members one entrepreneur who would take responsibility for the debarkation, registration, and cataloguing of immigrants, ensuring a smoother process and relieving the congregations of the burden of the meticulous accounting required at the point of disembarkation.

The next two points concerned the human dignity of the arriving Chinese. When immigrants arrived in the colony, they were transshipped to the Xom-Chiêu depot, during which process they were rarely treated with kindness and often received insults and abuse at the hands of custom's officials. More disturbing for the arriving Chinese was the process of registration, especially as it pertained to Chinese women and children.

The undersigned ask you, Mr. Governor General, to give orders for the immigrants to be treated people and not as dogs or pigs by the Immigration Head and Agents, and also that immigrant women and children are not subjected to the formality of measurement.⁴²⁰ [We]

⁴²⁰ Influenced no doubt by the “science” of craniology, by the 20th century, meticulous measurements and descriptions of Chinese immigrants were recorded to ensure correct identification of them by authorities should they have need.

don't know how to avoid that which is damaging to the chastity of the women and the girls, for various parts of their bodies to be felt by multiple people under the guise of looking for marks or signs suitable for establishing their identity.⁴²¹

The thought of this practice, viewed a gross violation of female Chinese immigrants, excited the congregations to action to protect the dignity of their fellow countrymen far more even than the insults and disparagement to which they were subjected upon their arrival in the colony. The remaining points all concerned business or taxes in some way. Point eight also dealt with treating Chinese humanely. The congregations asked that very elderly or disabled Chinese who had spent many years in the colony but were too aged or infirm to support themselves be exempt from their taxes, thus helping them to avoid deportation from the colony.

Point seven requested that established colonial merchants with valid colonially issued passports in hand be excused from the melee of the immigration queue. They argued that there was no benefit to paying taxes and receiving such a mandatory passport if they had to wait in the same line as the newly arrived, unregistered immigrants. The final points, nine through eleven, dealt with assorted issues of taxation, from the reestablishment of an old tourism tax to the reduction – and elimination for women and children – of the price of colonial passports. They also requested enhanced authority to expel members for the congregations, and for the establishment of a different system for collecting Chinese taxes that would be more convenient for congregation members.⁴²²

The point by point rebuttal issued by the Immigration service denied many of the Chinese allegations, even going so far as to accuse the petitioners of deliberate untruth on several of the issues. The rebuttal went on to claim that the Immigration

⁴²¹ Letter from the Chief of the Immigration and Identification Service, 23 November 1903, CAOM, INDO GGI 5729.

⁴²² Petition from the Chinese notables of Saigon and Cholon, no date, CAOM, INDO GGI 5729.

service itself had fallen victim to a concentrated attack by Cochinchina's Chinese community, and that as a fundamentally fiscally-based service, Immigration would inevitably draw the enmity of the people from whom it sought to collect;⁴²³ however, the significance of all of these issues brought before the Governor general by the Chinese is less the success or failure of their petition than it is their willingness and ability to approach the French government with an organized, multidimensional plan intended to better meet the needs of the overseas Chinese community. The solidarity exhibited by the Chinese community during this episode of 1903 is also a harbinger for things to come, an indication of the great potential for community action possessed by the overseas Chinese community if they felt it in their own best interests to mobilize.

As a point of clarification, it would be incorrect to imply that the only time Chinese imperial authorities approached the French about matters concerning the overseas Chinese was when they desired the extradition or suppression of criminals or revolutionaries. Imperial authorities also interceded on behalf of overseas Chinese, expending their political equity at the highest levels of French government to attempt to gain concessions for their citizens overseas. In 1905, China's Ambassador to Paris approached the French foreign ministry in Paris, asking for a reprieve from the head tax and relief, in the regions of Annam, Cambodia, and Laos, from the permits required for travel within those territories. The Chinese Ambassador had demanded a response from the French foreign ministry on at least three different occasions over a period of three years, and only in 1905 did he receive a complete response. The foreign ministry refused the ambassador's appeal on several fronts.

⁴²³ Letter from the Chief of the Immigration and Identification Service, 23 November 1903, CAOM, INDO GGI 5729.

First, with regard to the right of circulation, the Ministry pointed out that Chinese in Cambodia and Cochinchina, territories which had long been pacified by the French, *were* allowed to wander freely without special passes. According to the French, the necessity for circulation permits in Laos, Tonkin, and Annam was regrettable but unavoidable as the French extended their control in the region. As for the head tax, the foreign ministry pointed out that the levy was essential for the security of the Chinese empire.

The Imperial Government cannot refuse to recognize that in a country like Indochina, bordering Chinese provinces disturbed by secret societies, it is indispensable that local authorities strictly watch immigrants, verify their identities in a permanent way, and follow their movements exactly. Without such precautions, the French possessions would serve as a place of asylum to vagrants... these dangerous refugees could even create, shielded from our defense, centers of conspiracy about which your Government would not fail to complain.⁴²⁴

He also called attention to the fact that the Chinese enjoyed all of the benefits of the infrastructure provided to the colony by the French and therefore should be responsible for funding a portion of those improvements. Finally, he criticized the Chinese for complaining about the tax when the Indians in British colonies paid a similar levy but had never protested it. Although imperial intercession turned out to be a wasted endeavor, this anecdote, and others like it, still show that the Chinese Empire was willing to intercede with European governments on European soil to better the lives of her citizens overseas. It also shows the willingness of Indochina's overseas Chinese community to seek redress in the highest corridors of colonial power, rather than just striving for satisfaction with the local administrator or the French Consul in the Chinese native place.

⁴²⁴ Letter from French Foreign Ministry in Paris, 31 July 1905, CAOM, INDO GGI 7715.

If they had little luck with personal negotiations, overseas Chinese were not above taking their troubles to the press. In 1925, an article appeared in the Peking Daily News protesting the levy of the head tax upon overseas Chinese resident in Indochina and requesting that the tax be lifted by the French government and that the Chinese government and the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs do all in their power to help. This article claimed as its authors two representatives of Haiphong's Chinese Chamber of Commerce, Tch'en Yeou K'in and Siu Che Fa.⁴²⁵ While any such request by China's government was doomed to failure, the publication of this article in the Chinese press, where Indochina's administration was sure to hear of it, shows the audacity of Haiphong's Chamber of Commerce, which, without fear of retribution, took its grievance and aired it on an international stage.

Conclusion

Financial and commercial disputes provide an excellent lens through which to view details of the interactions between the overseas Chinese, indigenous, and French administrative communities. From these anecdotes, it becomes apparent that the overseas Chinese were willing to seek redress at all levels of government, whether dealing with the local administrator in their provinces of residence or with the French Minister of Foreign Affairs in Paris. Conflicts like those involving the Co Quang villagers show that indigenous communities took the same liberties when dealing with the Chinese. While the congregations usually initiated such pleas on behalf of their country men, the story of Ha-A-Tho indicates that Chinese also took it upon themselves to achieve satisfaction, and that the corridors of colonial power led to positive results, as well as negative ones, for those who dared to seek satisfaction.

⁴²⁵ Article from the Peking Ribao, 25 May 1925, CAOM, INDO GGI 55159.

CHAPTER 8: CONTROL AND CONTESTATION: CRIME, POLICING, AND IMMIGRATION IN THE CONGREGATIONS

For colonial authorities, the Chinese residing in Indochina in general, and in Cochinchina in particular, represented a significant proportion of the total population. In many respects, this situation empowered Cochinchina's Chinese by requiring the French to consider carefully any drastic changes in immigration or police policy in order to avoid serious economic and political repercussions, both in the colonies and internationally. Policing the enormous Chinese community in Indochina, not just for overt criminal activities but for immigration violations as well, proved to be the most difficult task undertaken by the French with regard to the Chinese. This enormous problem was mitigated to some degree by the congregation system, which placed final responsibility for unlawful Chinese activities in the hands of the Chinese themselves. Not only did this ensure some small degree of self-policing within the Chinese community, but it guaranteed that the French would be able to recoup any costs related to suppression of crimes committed by Chinese or deportation of illegal immigrants from the colony. In return, the colonial administration granted each congregation the right to refuse membership to any immigrant, or to repudiate current members at any time based on their unwillingness to vouch for the moral character of said members. This chapter addresses the issues of crime, immigration, surveillance, and congregational responsibility in Indochina as whole, but also focuses special attention on two unique problems: the fate of women and children in the colonies, and the issues confronting immigration control on the Tonkin, and to a lesser degree, Laotian borders.

Criminals, Revolutionaries, and Congregational Responsibility

The French were aware of the problems of policing the diverse populations of the Saigon-Cholon area from their earliest activities in the region. On January 30,

1876, the newly fledged Police Commissioner submitted a report to his superiors in which he outlined the number, types, and distribution of forces required to police the area effectively. For the suburbs, he placed Chinese translators first on his list of necessities. Surveillance of Chinese maritime activities also held pride of place for policing the main waterways from the cities to the sea, as well as from the cities to the interior of Cochinchina. This surveillance included tiny sampans and small junks, and was required to enforce customs duties and immigration regulations, as well as general legal issues. Finally, the report requested 10 Chinese agents⁴²⁶ to be appointed by the administration, who, while not themselves secret, would assist the secret agents in their work.⁴²⁷

In the commissioner's narrative report, the Chinese come before Annamite agents in all of these categories, giving the clear impression that the Chinese community was a more significant concern for the colonial administration than the indigenous community was. Whether this was the case because of their economic importance to the colony, or whether the French merely believed that the Chinese were more prone to lawbreaking is unclear. Nevertheless, the significance placed upon surveillance and law enforcement specifically directed towards the Chinese speaks powerfully of their influence in the new colony.

In the effort to assist surveillance of Indochina's Chinese, all Chinese travelers within the territory, even if they were permanent residents on Indochina, were required to display their residency cards at various travel points, such as train stations, and by demand of colonial authorities. In Hanoi, the president and vice president of the Cantonese congregation there viewed this as both an inconvenience and an affront to

⁴²⁶ Compared with only six Annamite agents.

⁴²⁷ *Projet de Réorganisation*, 30 January 1876, CAOM, INDO GGI 10271.

upstanding Chinese citizens who merely wanted to travel inside of Tonkin.⁴²⁸ Hanoi's police commissioner was less than sympathetic to this request. Not only did he comment that European nationals traveling within China were subject to the same regulations, but he questioned the character of the Cantonese vice-president in a way that revealed the true reasons underlying the practice of requiring identity cards at all times.

I must tell you that the second-in-command of the Congregation of Canton is back from a journey to China, and appears to me to have returned full of new aspirations, imprinted by a liberalism that would be a complete negation of any measure of public security. I learn, on the other hand, that secret meetings are held by certain notable Chinese, while the others among their countrymen would think of reviving the reformist question.⁴²⁹

French concern over reformist and revolutionary influences was not limited to the Chinese. The Vietnamese caused them far more anxiety as the 20th century progressed; however, unlike Vietnamese anti-colonialists, Chinese activists and rebels possessed a unique capacity to strain severely France's economic and political relationships with China. As the political situation in China became increasingly unstable, those who committed revolutionary acts, including assassinations, frequently fled across the border into China to escape Qing justice. In 1907, Phong Sing, a subprefect of Canton, was murdered by a group of Chinese revolutionaries. In August 1907, these revolutionaries seized the town of Fang Tcheng and, according to reports of the incident, assassinated Phong Sing for reasons "exclusively political," after which, they allegedly sought refuge in Tonkin.⁴³⁰

⁴²⁸ Letter from the President and Vice-President of Hanoi's Cantonese Congregation, 19 July 1910, TTLTQG1, RST 8962.

⁴²⁹ Letter from Tonkin's Police Commissioner, 14 July 1910, TTLTQG1, RST 8962.

⁴³⁰ Note for the Governor General, 9 February 1908, CAOM, INDO GGI 20341.

These six men, Kong Man Phu, Chun A Man, Ung Phoc, Vong Nhan, Thu Moui Shie, and Lo Quang Som, had actually been arrested by coincidence, for being in Tonkin illegally; however, their incarceration had come to the attention of the Viceroy of Canton who asked that they be detained on suspicion of murder.⁴³¹ By the time the Viceroy's request reached Tonkin, the six suspects had already been released to Hanoi's Cantonese congregation who had added them to their rolls. Although the French had demanded that the Cantonese president take responsibility for these men and present his plans to prevent their abrupt flight from justice, they were essentially free to pursue any diversions allowed to them by the congregation.⁴³²

The French postponed the extradition of these wanted men pending an official request from the Cantonese government, a request that had to be accompanied by hard evidence supporting their allegations against the incriminated individuals;⁴³³ however, the French seemed to have little doubt that the men they had detained were guilty of the assassination.⁴³⁴ This anecdote is instructive on several levels. Not only does it illuminate the relative ambivalence of the French government when confronting a problem that really did not affect them at all – in this case, the murder of a Chinese official for political reasons – but also, it reveals the great trust placed in the leaders of major Chinese congregations, and the relative surety of the colonial authorities that the congregation leaders would remain faithful to their obligations under colonial law.

This anecdote was hardly unique during the twilight of the Qing dynasty. In May 1908, China's Foreign minister complained to the French Ambassador to China that rebel forces affiliated with the prominent anti-Manchu revolutionary Sung-Tsen were using Tonkin as their place of escape, in which to regroup from attacks such as

⁴³¹ Note for the Governor General, 9 February 1908, CAOM, INDO GGI 20341.

⁴³² Telegram from the Resident Superior, 8 February 1908, CAOM, INDO GGI 20341.

⁴³³ Telegram from the Governor General, 10 February 1908, CAOM, INDO GGI 20341.

⁴³⁴ Telegram from the Resident Superior, 8 February 1908, CAOM, INDO GGI 20341.

the raid on HoKéou, which had already occurred, and to plan for new attacks on Manchu interests across the border. Accordingly, the Foreign Minister requested that France step up its surveillance in the border regions in the hopes of capturing these wanted criminals and extraditing them back to China. The French acceded to the Chinese request. As the Head of the Cabinet recommended to the Governor General, “It is important to avoid any border incident and especially, to prove to China that, in spite of inaccurate intelligence from the authorities in the Southern provinces, we have no intention of helping, or even of encouraging the rebels.”⁴³⁵

This decision had immediate ramifications for some of Hanoi’s long-established Chinese businessmen. As a result of Chinese pressure on the French to avoid any semblance of anti-dynastic prejudice, within ten days, the Resident Superior had identified several merchants of Tonkin who were affiliated with reformist parties or activities in China and had requested that they leave the colony. The four men, A-Veng, A-Pik, Long-Sang, and Wong-Cheng, despite having led exemplary colonial lives and having been long and profitably established in Hanoi, were not expelled; however, they, and a presumably long list of soon-to-be expelled Chinese who had not yet been formally identified by the French, were prohibited from reentering Tonkin at any time, under penalty of permanent expulsion, barring some change in the French relationship with Imperial China. The men were personally escorted to a ship departing to Hong Kong, and colonial authorities were ordered to watch the ship sail away to ensure that no one tried secretly to violate the “invitation” to leave. The Resident Superior did not attempt to hide the fact that these acts were all a result of political pressure from his northern neighbor. “They have been invited to leave

⁴³⁵ Telegram to the governor General, 7 May 1908, TTLTQG1, RST 21023.

Tonkin,” he wrote, “because of the political situation on the frontier and the necessity for the Administration to observe the strictest neutrality.”⁴³⁶

Businessmen were not the only ones to suffer from the new, unwritten rules of 1908.⁴³⁷ In August, Yuong Sao Panh, the Vice President of Hanoi’s Cantonese congregation was expelled from the colony because he regularly received packets containing 50 issues of the anarchist journal from Paris, “*La Vovaj Tempo*.”⁴³⁸ According to Tonkin’s police, this journal only addressed “civil war, mass murder, the overturning of all established institutions,” including “an abominable paeon to Leon Czolgosz, U. S. President William McKinley’s assassin.”⁴³⁹ The receipt of this journal, along with Yuong Sao Panh’s willingness to discuss the things he read, resulted in his demotion as Vice President of the Cantonese congregation and his immediate expulsion from the colony, an expulsion that was made official on September 1, 1908.⁴⁴⁰

Yuong Sao Panh hardly seemed like a dangerous man. According to intelligence reports following his arrest and expulsion, he was 51 years old, had been married for 40 years, and had six children. He came from Huong San village in Guangdong Province and he had lived in Tonkin for 19 years. When given the choice between exile to Hong Kong or exile to Singapore, Yuong chose Singapore, a circumstance that can either be seen to indicate his fear of Manchu reprisal as a result of entanglement with revolutionary affairs, or that he had spent so much of his life working in a colonial environment that was not yet ready to return home.⁴⁴¹ In either

⁴³⁶ Letter from the Resident Superior, 19 May 1908, TTLTQG1, RST 21023.

⁴³⁷ The new cooperation between France and China vis-à-vis anti-Manchu revolutionaries became official after an accord between the two nations was reached on January 4, 1909.

⁴³⁸ This journal was entitled “New World,” or *Xin Shijie*, in Chinese.

⁴³⁹ Note for the Resident Superior, 22 August 1908, TTLTQG1, RST 9255.

⁴⁴⁰ Official Order, 1 September 1908, TTLTQG1, RST 9255.

⁴⁴¹ Biographical Information, no date, TTLTQG1, RST 9255.

case, his biography hardly reads like that of man who needs to be escorted to the nearest ship, and whom the ship's captain is prohibited from allowing to debark at any but the final destination.⁴⁴² Shortly after his expulsion, Yuong spoke on his own behalf, begging the Resident Superior for permission to return to Hanoi temporarily, in order to rescue his wife and family who had languished there in his absence, and also to settle the affairs of the business he had operated in Hanoi for more than 19 years.⁴⁴³ When this request was forwarded to the Resident Superior, the reply, handwritten on the first page by the Resident Superior himself, leaves us wondering about Yuong's fate; the Resident Superior essentially says he will have to think about it.⁴⁴⁴

The Resident Superior seemed to believe that the problem of Chinese reformists in mountainous north Tonkin was gradually improving with time;⁴⁴⁵ however, his apparent optimism was not shared throughout the administration. In a letter to the Resident Superior, the Governor General voiced a concern for a rising trend among French bureaucrats, the truth of which is immediately obvious, nearly 100 years later, upon reviewing the records of the time. "It would be advisable to urge the agents of your administration not to apply the terms 'reformist' or 'revolutionary' to all Chinese criminals of common law who cross the border and cause disorder in Tonkin."⁴⁴⁶

As the Governor appropriately pointed out, not all accused Chinese broke the law for political reasons. In many cases, profit motivated overseas Chinese to break the law. In 1896, a Chinese worker named Lao Liet was the chief employee of the Ha Tân company. Four months prior to Lao Liet's downfall, the owner of the business

⁴⁴² Letter from the Vice Mayor of Haiphong, 3 September 1908, TTLTQG1, RST 9255.

⁴⁴³ Letter from Yuong Sao Panh, 29 November 1908, TTLTQG1, RST 9255.

⁴⁴⁴ Note for the Resident Superior, 15 December 1908, TTLTQG1, RST 9255.

⁴⁴⁵ Confidential Note from the Resident Superior, 22 March 1910, TTLTQG1, RST 13701.

⁴⁴⁶ Letter from the Governor General, 11 January 1910, TTLTQG1, RST 13701.

had announced that he needed to travel to Haiphong on business, a trip that turned out to be the pretext for him abandoning the colony to return to China without making good on any of his debts. Rather than disclose the abrupt departure of the owner, Lao Liet decided to continue selling goods under the Ha Tân name, keeping the profits and putting off his suppliers when they demanded payment for their goods. This charade only continued for a month until the suppliers became too menacing. Then, beleaguered by all concerned parties, Lao Liet refused to pay any supplier or creditor any recompense in money or goods.

Two suppliers filed formal complaints against Lao Liet with the French government. The first, the Vietnamese owner and proprietress of the property being used by Lao Liet, took Lao Liet in front of the local magistrate to reclaim the money owed her. On the same day as that hearing, the French Resident in Thai Nguyen was informed of the second complaint, made by a European supplier named Wurkling, and was directed to preserve whatever he could of the European's equity.⁴⁴⁷ In the ensuing investigation, Lao Liet's scheme came to light, and eventually, despite his lengthy protestations of innocence, he was expelled from Indochina.⁴⁴⁸ The passage of time renders us unable to determine whether or not Lao Liet's deception was intentional, or if he felt that he had an opportunity – previously unimaginable – to make a go of it in Indochina. His own letter of protest indicates that he was the victim, abused by French authorities and wrongly implicated as a deliberate swindler.⁴⁴⁹ Whether or not he intended to defraud people, he was undeniably less than honest, and in the end, he paid dearly for his ill-considered financial maneuvering.

Arrest as a criminal did not automatically guarantee expulsion for a Chinese resident of Indochina. In 1903, when local authorities in Nam Định arrested a 30 year

⁴⁴⁷ Letter from the French Resident in Thai Nguyen, 2 September 1896, TTLTQG1, RST 3305.

⁴⁴⁸ Note de service, 7 October 1896, TTLTQG1, RST 3305.

⁴⁴⁹ Letter from Lao Liet, 19 August 1896, TTLTQG1, RST 3305.

old Phuoc Kien man named A Thieu, he was at first labeled a vagabond with no employment or other means of subsistence. When police asked the Phuoc Kien congregation president if he would take responsibility for A Thieu, the answer was no, based on the man's limited mental faculties; however, authorities also discovered that A Thieu was related to a Hanoi businessman, A Thuan. The two were brothers-in-law. Rather than expulsion, Nam Đinh's Resident suggested handing A Thieu over to the care of his family and making them responsible for his conduct.⁴⁵⁰ Unfortunately, protracted efforts to contact A Thuan seem to have yielded no result. In the end, a handwritten note scrawled by the Governor General seems to reveal A Thieu's fate. "He should have been expelled a long time ago if no one is responding about him."⁴⁵¹ Even if A Thieu met with expulsion in the end, it seems clear that French authorities did not rely upon expulsion as a one-size-fits-all penalty for law breaking. The fact that they attempted to locate Tonkin-based family willing to take charge of the mentally handicapped man before removing him from the colony shows an instance of true compassion, how ever rare, in the colonial milieu.

Likewise, the penalty of expulsion was not necessarily irrevocable exile from Indochina. A-Hyan, a former president of Hanoi's Cantonese congregation, had been expelled from Tonkin in 1886 after submitting requests to the Resident Superior demanding that the head tax be abolished for Chinese residents in Annam and Tonkin. Claiming ignorance of French law as his excuse, A-Hyan begged permission to return to Tonkin and resume his business, emphasizing, how ever sincerely, his devotion to French law, as evidenced by his unwillingness to reenter Tonkin without the permission of the Governor General.⁴⁵² The following year, largely as a result of the support he received from Hanoi's Chinese notables, A-Hyan received permission to

⁴⁵⁰ Letter from the French Resident in Nam Đinh, 7 July 1903, TTLTQG1, RST 5628.

⁴⁵¹ Note from the Governor General, no date, TTLTQG1, RST 5628.

⁴⁵² Letter from the Cantonese A-Hyan, 31 December 1888, TTLTQG1, RST 8629.

return to Tonkin and continue his business there.⁴⁵³ These documents represent a flexibility in colonial law as it was applied by the French that, while not necessarily typical, is still worthy of note.

Inevitably, the severity of the crime of which Chinese had been convicted directly impacted the clemency, or lack thereof, exhibited by the French. In 1896, 32 Tonkin-based Chinese were arrested, convicted of piracy, and sentenced to as many as ten years of incarceration at Poulo Condore, the length of the sentence determined by the nature of each man's crime, to be followed by immediate expulsion from the colony. According to the original order of condemnation, these men stood convicted, not of being brigands themselves, but of providing material aid, intelligence, and supplies to the actual criminals who roamed across northern Tonkin, thus hampering French attempts to pacify the region.⁴⁵⁴

Seven months after the arrest of these 32 individuals, congregation leaders from Hanoi and Haiphong, along with significant Chinese businessmen from both cities, came together to submit a petition to the Governor General begging him to grant clemency to the incarcerated individuals. This petition played upon the most basic fundamentals of French nationalism. Submitted on July 13, the day before Bastille Day, the Chinese wrote, "On the occasion of the celebration of Noble France, which every Frenchman and their friends will soon celebrate, they come with confidence to beg you, Sir Governor General, to forgive the remainder of the punishment left to their unfortunate fellow countrymen." To assure the Governor General that he would not come to regret any clemency he offered, they added that "they [would] take necessary measures to ensure that they will never again step foot on Indochina's soil."⁴⁵⁵

⁴⁵³ Letter from the Resident Superior, 28 December 1889, TTLTQG1, RST 8629.

⁴⁵⁴ Letter from the Secretary General in Hanoi, 17 August 1896, TTLTQG1, RST 8980.

⁴⁵⁵ Petition from the Chinese of Hanoi and Haiphong, 13 July 1896, TTLTQG1, RST 8980.

Tonkin's Secretary General found the proposed release of the condemned men not only unjust, but also a danger to public welfare.

Today, as on the day that I signed the order, I reckon that these motives for general and public interest exist still and that they have to forbid us any premature forgiveness, any indulgence which, in the eyes of the Asiatics, would be seen as weakness.

Never losing sight that the work of pacification in these parts of the country cost a lot of blood and silver and that it is not yet finished, I think that it would be very dangerous to set at liberty individuals whose complicity allowed, for such a long time, the pirates of Yen-The and Cai-Kinh to be informed about our planned troop movements and of our supply caches in food, in weapons, in ammunitions, in the mountains where they had found refuge.⁴⁵⁶

The risk of undermining the French Administration's control over the region caused the Secretary the most concern, and he expressed deep concern over any action on the part of the government that might cause the Chinese to lose their fear of possible French reprisals.

French Influence and Protection of Overseas Chinese

Though the anecdotes related so far have dealt with Chinese perpetrators of crime or disorder, the Chinese also found themselves to be victims of crime and required French intervention to protect their lives and property. When this happened in Indochina, it most often took the form of negotiation, with local or regional authorities mediating between offended parties to reach an amicable solution acceptable to all parties; however, when the crimes befalling Chinese residents of Indochina were taking place back in China, matters became more complex. In 1902, in one of many examples of such phenomena, ten prominent Chinese merchants from Fujian province personally requested the assistance of the French Consul in Fuzhou in

⁴⁵⁶ Letter from the Secretary General in Hanoi, 17 August 1896, TTLTQG1, RST 8980.

protecting their families and property in Fujian province from the frequent violence and disorder that afflicted Fujian at the time.⁴⁵⁷

This situation was complex on a number of levels. In the first place, it gives us a clear indication of the fact that, in the twilight of the Chinese empire, overseas Chinese businessmen felt that Chinese authorities could offer them no protection against the degrading security situation in their native places. For them, despite subethnic connections, the best bet for material and physical security remained colonial intervention. In the second place, this situation put the French in an uncomfortable position. The French were not responsible for securing Chinese territory, and technically, although there might have been a few exceptions, the overseas Chinese businessmen so vital to Indochina's commerce and prosperity were not French citizens. Therefore, intervention for these merchants basically meant a foreign government intervening with China on behalf of Chinese citizens.

The French were reluctant to get involved politically in the fates of overseas Chinese businessmen, more out of an unwillingness to be drawn into internecine Chinese conflicts than for any other reason, but they also recognized that the English and the Japanese felt no such compunctions when it came to interceding on behalf of Straits or Formosan Chinese, respectively.⁴⁵⁸ Accordingly, they devised a plan intended to limit French involvement in internal Chinese matters while still offering protection to the prominent merchants most in need. By this system, the French Consul in Amoy would have a list of the names of all prominent Indochinese-based Chinese businessmen with interests in the area and would intercede personally with local Chinese administrators when one of the listed individuals required assistance. "It would be an unofficial patronage, a personal and discreet action of our representative

⁴⁵⁷ Letter from the French Consul in Fuzhou, 16 October 1902, CAOM, INDO GGI 18318.

⁴⁵⁸ Letter from the French Consul in Fuzhou, 16 October 1902, CAOM, INDO GGI 18318.

with local authorities to draw their attention to all the cases where the families would be victims, either of acts of violence and robbery, or of the slowness, failings, and quirks of the Chinese administration, in brief and only in the cases involving law and order.”⁴⁵⁹

Despite the benevolence exhibited by the French in this case, the plea of Cantonese businessman Sam Cang shows that French protection did not extend to all supplicants. When roving brigands and an unstable political situation in Guangzhou threatened his life and property, Sam Cang appealed to the French protection, but was rebuffed by the French Consul in Canton. The Consul argued that Sam Cang had exaggerated the danger to his interests in Canton and also emphasized the danger of extending protection to one Chinese citizen when they had refused protection in other similar cases.⁴⁶⁰ Distraught, Sam Cang appealed to the Governor General in Hanoi, writing, “The long stay in Cochinchina by my relatives made me hope that I could count on protection if necessary. Today I am in an uncertain situation as regards the safety of myself and of my family. I appealed to your representative in China for the high protection of France; this protection was refused to me for the only motive that I am not a French subject.”⁴⁶¹ In fact, Sam Cang his father Sam Lanh before him had spent nearly 50 years in Cochinchina, occupying positions of great respect in the community and operating important businesses there without irregularity or complaint.⁴⁶² Despite a solid reputation and a long history in French territory, the documents imply that Sam Cang was refused the protection he so desperately sought.

⁴⁵⁹ Letter from the French Consul in Fuzhou, 16 October 1902, CAOM, INDO GGI 18318.

⁴⁶⁰ Letters from the French Consul in Canton, 6 January 1913 & 15 January 1913, CAOM, INDO GGI 20099.

⁴⁶¹ Letter from the Cantonese Sam Canh, 26 November 1912, CAOM, INDO GGI 20099.

⁴⁶² Letter from the Mayor of Cholon, 5 October 1910, CAOM, INDO GGI 20099.

Immigration

Some of the biggest issues confronting the Chinese and the Chinese congregations in Indochina were the immigration and head taxes. As in other countries in Southeast Asia, Chinese usually opposed tax increases that applied to them, but despite the images of massive strikes and boycotts that caused urban centers to grind to a halt, most of these protests were far more genteel. In Indochina, the Chinese congregations usually stood at the vanguard of attempts to defend the interests of their communities, and the carefully worded petitions they periodically forwarded to the Cochinchinese administration revealed not only a true concern for the welfare of their less powerful constituents, but also an awareness of international politics and a desire to find middle ground for both sides of an argument.

A proposed increase in the head tax to be levied upon Chinese residents of Saigon and Cholon in 1918 drew a quick but measured response from the presidents of the congregations, who expressed regret over the difficulties imposed upon all of Indochina's residents during World War I.

Regrettably the consequences of the war were felt in your colony and you know about the economic crisis the colony is going through at present: Chinese businesses in Cochinchina have suffered from it and will continue to suffer from it for perhaps a long time; exports have, so to speak, stopped and the import business is considerably reduced because of the transport crisis; so that existence in Cochinchina became particularly difficult for small storekeepers and the Chinese workers who constitute the bulk of the Chinese immigrant population in your colony. To demand the tax from them which has been suggested at present, is, in our opinion, if we may respectfully suggest, to stop the importation of manual laborers into this country, the necessity for which is one of the essential problems for the desired development of the Colony; It is also to run a serious risk to see soon that your High

Administration has the obligation to expel, en masse, Chinese coolies who will not have been able to comply with the tax.⁴⁶³

One issue that severely challenged French control over Indochina's overseas Chinese community concerned the use of Chinese names. As discussed in the introduction to this dissertation, all Chinese names also had corresponding Vietnamese pronunciations, and by the 20th century, a fair proportion of overseas Chinese went by the *quốc ngữ* (or Vietnamese) pronunciations of their names while they were in Indochina. For French colonial authorities, the problem was that one Vietnamese transliteration of a specific Chinese character might actually be a homonym for dozens, or even scores, of other Chinese characters.

In 1912, the French Vice-Consul in Amoy sent an irritated letter to Governor General Sarraut complaining of this very problem. The Governor General had forwarded four legal writs to Amoy, requesting that the Vice Consul ensure their delivery to the interested parties. The names of the three involved Chinese parties, as well as the name of the village from which they came, were all presented to the Vice Consul in *quốc ngữ*. Not only was the Vice Consul unable to locate the individuals, he could not even identify the village from which they were supposed to have hailed. Emphasizing the hopelessness of his task, he complained to the Governor General, writing:

This is not the first time that I have found myself in the presence of this difficulty. Also, allow me to wish that the Chinese established in Indochine are known to the administration or to French justice only by names which, in their country, are absolutely unknown and consequently make it impossible to research or immediately identify them if they have business in their country of origin. Besides that, generally speaking, their name is transcribed in Indochina with Annamite pronunciation. They are very often known only by their first name, according to the customs of the Cantonese and Fujianese... And

⁴⁶³ Petition by the Presidents of the Chinese Congregations of Saigon and Cholon, November 1918, CAOM, INDO GGI 50952.

so, an individual whose name is Hong-Teng in dialect of Amoy becomes, in legal documents, Ah-trinh. But even if one used the Chinese pronunciation, identification, while being greatly facilitated, would still not be certain, given the quirks of transcriptions.⁴⁶⁴

To combat this problem, the Vice Consul urged that Chinese characters become a standard part of all French legal documents pertaining to Chinese with interests in Indochina.

While this solution might have ameliorated the problem faced by the colonial administration, it did not solve the basic dilemma faced by researchers of the Chinese overseas. While the French possessed extensive immigration records using pictures and Chinese characters to match Chinese residents of Indochina to the Vietnamese pronunciation of their names, many of these Chinese still signed official documents using *quốc ngữ* rather than characters. Additionally, internal French documents, while occasionally using the personal immigration numbers assigned to Chinese upon their arrival in French territory, almost always refer to Chinese by the *quốc ngữ* transliteration of their names. The result of this problem, compounded by the difficulties posed by the varied dialects spoken by the overseas Chinese in Indochina, is that it is often extremely difficult, even using Chinese sources such as temple stele or institutional records, to match with any certainty names written in Chinese characters and names appearing in *quốc ngữ* in colonial sources.

Women and Children

The realities of community demographics require any study of the overseas Chinese in Indochina in the late 19th and early 20th centuries focuses upon the lives and endeavors of men, almost completely ignoring women and children in the process. This omission is essentially unavoidable. Women and children comprised a very tiny percentage of Indochina's Chinese population and rarely appear in any archival

⁴⁶⁴ Letter from the French Vice Consul in Amoy, 16 February 1912, CAOM, INDO GGI 19165.

documents except perhaps for colonial pictures, where they are recorded faithfully along with all of the other ethnicities and indigenous curiosities that captured the attention of colonial visitors or scholars. The one documentary exception to this rule concerns immigration, when the legal status of wives or families became an issue for government officials, but they only rarely surfaced in immigration-related documents as well, leaving us to wonder what, exactly, the lives of Chinese wives must have been like in Indochina.

The first and most critical point to remember when dealing with the wives of Indochina's overseas Chinese is that those wives were not always themselves Chinese. Although I am not aware of any data detailing exact statistics on the topic, overseas Chinese did marry Vietnamese women. Paradoxically, the French were quite protective of indigenous women when it came to relationships with Chinese men. They are often preoccupied by the notion that these women are being shipped to China against their will, kidnapped by cunning Chinese who will not attend to their welfare. Apparently, these suspicions were not without foundation. In his work on human trafficking, Eric Tagliacozzo comments on the rising concern of Straits Settlement officials that Singapore-based Chinese were using Annam as a source for women to fuel the regional sex industry.⁴⁶⁵ The veracity of this tidbit of information is bolstered by the fact that, ostensibly to protect Vietnamese women from immorality, abandonment, or other evils, the French strictly regulated the departures of Vietnamese women from the colonies into China, or accompanied by Chinese.

This reluctance extended even into apparent family units, as the case of one particular Sino-Vietnamese family in Baria indicated. This family, consisting of the Chinese man, his Cochinchinese wife, and their two children, desired permission to

⁴⁶⁵ Eric Tagliacozzo, *Secret Trades, Porous Borders: Smuggling and States along a Southeast Asian Frontier, 1865-1915*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 232.

return together to China with the man, who was leaving the colony. The couple had lived together in Baria for more than ten years but because no documentary evidence existed to support their claims of permanence, French law technically prohibited the woman and children from following the man. To get around these restrictions, if Cochinchina's Lieutenant Governor personally approved of the arrangement, the couple would be required to obtain sworn affidavits from village officials, attesting both to their lengthy cohabitation and to the births of their children. Baria's Administrator felt that if the couple provided all of the required documentation, the woman should be allowed to leave, "especially since she has no other family in Cochinchina."⁴⁶⁶ When the couple sought the Lieutenant Governor's approval, the Lieutenant Governor informed them that a sworn affidavit of paternity would suffice to take the children back to China; however, he said nothing about what would be required to allow the woman to leave for China with her family. This omission forced Baria's Administrator to contact the Lieutenant Governor again, requesting clarification about what to tell this woman who so clearly desired to leave Cochinchina with her family.⁴⁶⁷ The final disposition of this case is unknown, but it does give an indication of the difficulties and suspicion encountered by mixed race families simply trying to live their lives in the ways most convenient for themselves.

Even métis women could not escape the strict control of the French. In 1899, a 23-year-old Cantonese man named Tche Tong headed back to China from Nam Đinh with Nguyen A-Kan, a métis woman whom he claimed to have married seven months before in Nam Đinh. The two youths were apprehended by maritime Customs officials in Pakhoi;⁴⁶⁸ at the time of their arrests, they had no papers other than a temporary permit issued to Tche Tong for entry into Tonkin. The couple had boarded

⁴⁶⁶ Letter from Baria's Administrator, 2 October 1895, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.12/267(33).

⁴⁶⁷ Letter from Baria's Administrator, 14 October 1895, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.12/267(33).

⁴⁶⁸ Current-day Beihai, a coastal city in southeastern Guangxi Province.

the ship “Hating” in Pakhoi under unspecified “fraudulent” circumstances, a trespass that resulted in Tche Tong’s detention by Pakhoi’s local Chinese authorities, and the remand of Nguyen A-Kan to the French. Eventually, Tche Tong was turned over to the French as well for deportation to Hong Kong.⁴⁶⁹

The French Vice Consul assigned to Pakhoi and Tung-Hing⁴⁷⁰ considered the couple deeply suspicious. “It is inexplicable, in any case, that these two individuals, instead of taking the boat that goes directly to Hong-Kong in Haiphong, preferred to go first to Moncay by rowboat, then by junk from Tung Hing to Pakhoi, where they do not know anybody.”⁴⁷¹ He was neither convinced by nor interested in Tche Tong’s assertions that he had married the young woman in Nam Đinh, and that the young couple was heading back to Tche Tong’s parents’ house in Hong Kong, where they intended to stay for a while.⁴⁷² Frankly, the French suspicion seems unfounded. With the exception of sneaking aboard the Pakhoi boat under dubious circumstances, the couple seems to have exhibited no criminal or suspicious behavior, and if they had exhibited such behavior, the French would certainly have made note of it in their records. In fact, the only thing they seem to have been guilty of doing was taking the slow boat to China, so to speak. If Tche Tong’s story is taken at face value – a newly married couple returning to the husband’s family to visit for a time – then the story fits the circumstance. After all, what was the hurry?⁴⁷³

While conflicts over the status of Vietnamese women typically revolved around whether they should be allowed to leave the country, disputes involving Chinese women most often centered around whether they should be allowed to stay.

⁴⁶⁹ It is unclear why the French would want to deport Tche Tong personally when he was already in China, unless, in addition to deportation, some kind of criminal penalty was due him for his violations.

⁴⁷⁰ Tung-Hing is the Chinese city immediately across from Moncay on the Tonkin border.

⁴⁷¹ Letter from the French Vice-Consul in Pakhoi and Tung Hing, 31 July 1899, TTLTQG1, RST 8895.

⁴⁷² Letter from the French Vice-Consul in Pakhoi and Tung Hing, 31 July 1899, TTLTQG1, RST 8895.

⁴⁷³ Unfortunately, the outcome of Tche-Tong and Nguyen A-Kan’s story is unknown.

Incidents of Chinese women fleeing abusive or unhappy relationships by crossing into Tonkin pepper colonial documents; some of these cases are straightforward, but others reveal the complicated cultural milieu of the Sino-Vietnamese border region at the turn of the 19th century. One such case concerned the Cantonese man Vong Sen-San and his erstwhile wife, Ly Si. According to Ly-Si, in 1900, her husband, a gambling addict, reached his gaming nadir, losing everything to the game. In response to this collapse, he sold their two children into servitude and sent his wife away, wanting nothing more to do with her. Living off the charity and generosity of strangers, Ly Si made her way Tonkin and then to Nam Đĩnh, where she finally settled. The trek to Tonkin was no wild flight of fancy for her; the family had been based in Tong-Hing, the town adjacent to Moncay on the Tonkin border. The following year, she met and married Hang Huru, the pilot of the Chinese longboat “Phuc Sinh.”

Unfortunately, after a year of marriage, Vong Sen-San returned for Ly Si, demanding that she return with him to Canton to resume their lives. Vong Sen-San repeatedly journeyed to Nam Đĩnh to demand his wife’s return but she adamantly refused to depart with him, fleeing whenever he appeared to demand her return. By early 1903, both parties were nearing their wits’ end. In Tonkin, Ly Si requested that French authorities intervene on her behalf and protect her from Vong Sen-San, whom she claimed had threatened her repeatedly. For his part, Vong Sen-San had sought assistance from a higher power. He enlisted the aid of Father Grandpierre, a Catholic missionary from Lo-Fao in Guangdong. Father Grandpierre intervened with the French Commander in Moncay, contact that eventually led to the involvement of Nam Đĩnh’s French Resident, and even the Resident Superior, with the case. One might justifiably wonder at the involvement of a catholic priest in this cross-border marriage dispute. After all, at the time of Ly Si’s abandonment, both parties were Buddhist; however, while Ly Si remained Buddhist, at some point during the two years

following his tacit dissolution of their marriage, Vong Sen-San had converted to Catholicism, suddenly finding himself unable to remarry ever again without violating a sacred writ of his new religion.

In his letter to the Resident Superior, Nam Đĩnh's Resident, without ever overtly challenging the involvement of the church in the incident, expresses thinly veiled skepticism at the priest's story. He denies that Ly Si avoided all meetings with her husband, averring instead that she fled to Hanoi after a meeting between the two was convened on neutral French territory in the Residency itself. He goes on to question implicitly the validity of Vong Sen-San's conversion in the first place, writing "Vong Sen-San has been Catholic for only two years, from the date of the intervention of Father Grandpierre."⁴⁷⁴ In response to the priest's assertion that colonial law required the return of wife to husband, he points out that the purpose of this law was to protect Vietnamese women kidnapped by pirates and sold as slaves in China, not to force the return of a woman who fled her husband of her own free will.⁴⁷⁵ Thus, in a single dispute between husband and wife, colonial authorities found themselves embroiled in a conflict between two individuals that involved gambling, bigamy, Chinese law, international borders, marital disharmony, and the Roman Catholic Church.

In the end, the French decision was clear but completely toothless. If Vong Sen-San changed his place of residence to Nam Đĩnh and thereafter filed formal complaints under two articles of the Annamite Code,⁴⁷⁶ French police would personally escort her back to her husband's home; however, Vong Sen-San would not

⁴⁷⁴ Letter from the French Resident in Nam Đĩnh, 10 July 1903, TTLTQG1, RST 8854.

⁴⁷⁵ Letter from the French Resident in Nam Đĩnh, 10 July 1903, TTLTQG1, RST 8854.

⁴⁷⁶ Under article 108 of the Annamite Code and Title V of the Handbook of Annamite Civil Legislation, which addressed the rights and duties of marriage. Letter from Hanoi's General Prosecutor, 20 July 1903, TTLTQG1, RST 8854.

be able to imprison his wife in his home without risk of being charged with her illegal and arbitrary detention. Furthermore, if Vong Sen-San remained in China, French authorities would only be able to escort her to the border, and would not take responsibility for her actions or location after that.⁴⁷⁷ This last situation seemed the most likely, as the Resident Superior had already implied that the Cantonese congregation in Nam Đinh, perhaps in support for Ly Si and her new husband, would be less than willing to vouch for Vong Sen-San as a local Chinese resident.⁴⁷⁸ In other words, Ly Si had to return to her husband and her marital responsibilities, but Vong Sen-San could do nothing to keep her there against her will.⁴⁷⁹

While the circumstances of this particular case were certainly unique, the general situation vis-à-vis bigamist Chinese women in Tonkin was not. The French clearly struggled with how to dispose of women who, on the one hand, had committed neither crime nor irregularity while in the colonies but who, on the other hand, were highly sought after by Chinese authorities acting on behalf of abandoned Chinese men. Not surprisingly, this problem affected Tonkin more than any of Indochina's other regions and the border region wrestled with this situation most of all. In 1909, Cao Bang's police commissioner sent a missive to the governor General asking clarification about when it would be permissible to expel Guangxi women who had established themselves in Tonkin and remarried without attending to their previous marital situation back in China. Based upon the terms of the treaties between China and France regarding extradition, French authorities would only remand people to imperial officials if they fell into one of three categories: if they were the object of a deportation order signed by the Tonkin's Resident Superior or by Indochina's Governor General; if their extradition was granted after fulfillment of formalities

⁴⁷⁷ Letter from Hanoi's General Prosecutor, 20 July 1903, TTLTQG1, RST 8854.

⁴⁷⁸ Letter from the French Resident in Nam Đinh, 10 July 1903, TTLTQG1, RST 8854.

⁴⁷⁹ Letter from Hanoi's General Prosecutor, 20 July 1903, TTLTQG1, RST 8854.

indicated by Circular 85s of February 10, 1908; or if they crossed the border without passport or permit. In the cases of the Guangxi natives who so troubled the Police Commissioner, however, none of these situations applied, meaning that while Chinese law might criminalize the irregularity of their marital status, French law did not. The women were not officially vagabonds and, therefore, there were no grounds for deportation. In order to extradite these women, the imperial government was required to prove that they had actually formally remarried while in Tonkin, at which point Chinese officials could pursue the repatriation of these women.⁴⁸⁰

Tonkin: Immigration and Surveillance on a Porous Frontier

Tonkin posed a unique problem for the organization, surveillance, and control of Chinese immigration, because the immense border with China, characterized mainly by thinly inhabited villages and narrow mountain trails, defied attempts to monitor it. Accordingly, the Tonkinese administration only became aware of the presence of illegal Chinese sojourners after they found them wandering around somewhere in Tonkin. In 1899, French police officials on Tonkin's border complained about the constant and unstoppable stream Chinese medicine peddlers, theater troupes, geomancers, and even necromancers that flooded into French territory.⁴⁸¹ In 1901, concern had shifted to the Chinese slipping across the border in order to distribute short stories coming out of popular Chinese theater, but that contained "biased or alarming" news, predominantly about the events occurring in China.⁴⁸² As is easily imagined from the following picture, these theater troupes were particularly hard to surveil, as they consisted of just a few members who traveled

⁴⁸⁰ Letter from the Governor General, 4 November 1909, TTLTQG1, RST 8956.

⁴⁸¹ Letter from the Commander of the National Police, 21 December 1899, TTLTQG1, RST 8896.

⁴⁸² Letter from the Minister of Colonies, 9 February 1909, CAOM, INDO GGI 22537.

freely and easily throughout the countryside with few belongings and no ties to any given congregation or place.



Figure 17 Chinese Theatrical Troupe⁴⁸³

By 1905, the banditry and opium smuggling issues along the border had grown so severe that Yen Bay's resident recommended with scathing anti-Chinese commentary that whole sections of the province be closed to the Chinese presence. "All the Chinese who live in the China border region are unmistakably bandits, past, present, or future. This assertion results from facts and it is not open to debate."⁴⁸⁴ In this instance, the Resident Superior was openly disapproving of the official's attitude and refused his request: "It is impossible to envision a general action against these

⁴⁸³ http://images.google.com/imgres?imgurl=http://hinhxua.free.fr/autrefois/chinois/Cholon_la_procession_du_dragon.jpg&imgrefurl=http://hinhxua.free.fr/autrefois/chinois/photo_chinois_vn.htm&h=457&w=719&sz=97&tbnid=BguALWogy0tqM:&tbnh=88&tbnw=139&hl=en&start=2&p. Feb 12, 2006.

⁴⁸⁴ Letter from Yen Bay's Resident, 26 June 1905, TTLTQG1, RST 4267.

individuals in the sense proposed by Mr. Damade for no other reason than their nationality.”⁴⁸⁵

Chinese caravanners, as the French called them, posed a real problem for the colonial administration. The problem was that not all caravanners were undesirable. The French made a distinction between caravanning and peddling, a dubious division that used native place as a seemingly random point of dissimilarity; caravanners from Yunnan were typically good, while caravanners from the two Guangs or Sichuan were utterly undesirable. In fact, the actual point of distinction seems to have been intent rather than native place. According to the French, Yunnanese peddlers were essential to the local economy, especially in the highlands of Tonkin and Laos, because they were genuine traveling storekeepers, mostly honest and without ulterior motives.⁴⁸⁶ Guangxi, Guangdong, and Sichuan, however, produced peddlers who crossed the border primarily to trade trinkets to the local montagnards in exchange for opium.⁴⁸⁷ This latter trade the French found unacceptable; the flourishing drug trade in the rural mountains gave drug smugglers months during the winter where they could camp or perpetuate their trade in opium unmolested by local authorities.⁴⁸⁸ The problem was differentiating between the two on the frontier.

To solve this problem, Indochina’s government began negotiations with Yunnanese authorities across the border to discuss providing legitimate Yunnanese caravanners with some sort of identification to distinguish them from the bandits and drug smugglers that roamed the area. Even the delegate in Yunnan seemed a bit skeptical about this plan. Peddlers rarely departed from large urban centers and if

⁴⁸⁵ Letter from the resident Superior, 21 July 1905, TTLTQG1, RST 4267.

⁴⁸⁶ For more exhaustive treatment of the Yunnan caravanners, see Prasertkul Chiranan, *Yunnan Trade in the 19th century: Southwest China’s Cross-boundaries Functional System* (Bangkok: Institute of Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn University, 1989).

⁴⁸⁷ Letter from the Governor General, 21 April 1919, TTLTQG1, RST 8937.

⁴⁸⁸ Letter from the Commander of the 4th Military Territory, 25 September 1919, TTLTQG1, RST 8937.

right of passage were granted to anyone saying they were peddling goods in northern Indochina, nothing stopped undesirable elements from attaining such a card through deceit.⁴⁸⁹ In the end, a conflict between the Resident in Laos, who insisted that the caravans were indispensable to his region, and the Resident Superior in Tonkin, who felt that they should not be allowed to enter his territory unless they submitted to all manner of searches and guarantees, resulted in the matter being tabled indefinitely.⁴⁹⁰ With the exception of increased border surveillance for political reasons, the tabling of this issue no doubt resulted in a return to the status quo for caravanners and drug runners alike.

Managing the problem of opium smuggling on the Sino-Tonkinese border was a task of such magnitude that one cannot help but be sympathetic to the exasperated French officials struggling to control the trade. Writing about drug smuggling in maritime Southeast Asia on the Anglo-British frontier, Eric Tagliacozzo comments, “The entire length of the Straits of Melaka acted as a shallow sieve, one that leaked contraband opium onto the coasts of Sumatra.”⁴⁹¹ Despite the largely overland nature of the Sino-Tonkin opium trade,⁴⁹² a similar scenario can be imagined for Tonkin and Laos as well. Far north Tonkin and Laos essentially acted as an endless sea of mountains, where smugglers could disappear for weeks at a time and where the occasional apprehension of drug dealers was more a matter of French good fortune

⁴⁸⁹ Letter from the Delegate to Yunnan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 14 May 1919, TTLTQG1, RST 8937.

⁴⁹⁰ Note from the Residence Superior of Tonkin, 24 August 1919, TTLTQG1, RST 8937.

⁴⁹¹ Tagliacozzo, *Secret Trades*, 190.

⁴⁹² Tonkin and South China also shared a maritime border, which was itself notorious for piracy and smuggling. The geology of the region, consisting primarily of soft limestone, or karst, formations, meant that caves, inlets, and makeshift anchorages abounded, providing ample protection for local sea dwellers bent on smuggling or piracy. But, as the water-based, migrant population of the coastal region did not contribute significantly to the problem of how to organize the Chinese in Indochina, it is not a subject that this dissertation will address.

than of the skill of colonial surveillance. As the following photograph indicates, the rural and remote nature of the many passages from Tonkin into China served to further complicate an already untenable situation with regard to borders and immigration controls.



Figure 18 Road to China⁴⁹³

The other major problem facing Tonkin's authorities concerned the application of congregational law to the established Chinese communities in the mountain regions. As has been discussed in previous chapters, French law required that congregations bear the cost of immigration, expulsion, or taxes due from any Chinese circulating in the territory; however, the cost of shipping someone back to Hong Kong through Haiphong, especially for inland Chinese, was really quite exorbitant. Further compounding this problem was the severe poverty of the northern highlands, meaning that the people expected to bear the cost burden of expulsion were barely managing a

⁴⁹³ <http://www.nguyenphuococ.com/hinhxua/hinhxua.htm>. Feb 12, 2006.

hand-to-mouth existence in the first place. Even the French recognized the impossibility of the situation. In 1902, in his monthly report, the Resident of Bac-Kan wrote,

There is no congregation in Bac-Kan province, except for multiple Chinese agglomerations, foreign to the unity of the others and who would not hear of uniting for anything. Without gross injustice, and without causing an exodus of these people, unfortunate but nevertheless useful, we can not force them to pay for foreigners who secretly enter into the province, thanks to the ease with which they can cross the military territory.⁴⁹⁴

Wandering Chinese did not constitute the only immigration issue on the northern border. In 1909, as the French sought to establish the brand new province of Lai Châu, they struggled with how to classify the various Chinese residents of the province. The eventual imposition of the congregation system was a foregone conclusion,⁴⁹⁵ but the disposition of the local Chinese prior to its application was a matter of some debate. In the end, the French decided to categorize long established Chinese in the region as indigenous and non-permanent Chinese as overseas Chinese. The primary distinction between these two classifications concerned payment of the annual tax.⁴⁹⁶ The fascinating thing about this particular situation is the utterly arbitrary nature of the French resolution. After all, Chinese who had lived in Lai Châu forever were no less Chinese than Chinese who were just working there for a while. This anecdote also speaks to the false sense of absolutism conveyed by the Western notion of political borders. Whether the Chinese families of Lai Châu lived 100 yards inside of China or 100 yards inside of Vietnam, they were still the same people living the same lives in the same place they had always called home.

⁴⁹⁴ Extract from Bac-Kan's monthly report in December 1902, TTLTQG1, RST 8914.

⁴⁹⁵ Letter from the Resident of Lai Châu, 26 March 1910, TTLTQG1, RST 8664.

⁴⁹⁶ Note from Indochina's Government General, 14 August 1909, TTLTQG1, RST 8664.

From the French perspective, economic gain and opportunities for employment constituted the most innocent of the motives attributed to Chinese working and living in the far north. The colonial administration concerned itself far more with possible intrigues and unrest propagated by Chinese revolutionaries or speculators using the flexible mining and engineering conglomerates as a cover for their clandestine activities. Chinese laborers working near Gia-Lâm in Bac-Ninh province found themselves subjected to particularly intense scrutiny as a result of their proximity to and association with the Yunnan Railroad Company.⁴⁹⁷ For Chinese entrepreneurs based in Tonkin's capital, Hanoi, the business and employment opportunities offered for a time by the unique juxtaposition of multitudes of Chinese laborers, the intensive corporate centralization of the Railroad Company, and the remoteness of Gia-Lâm from any other major urban center proved irresistible in terms of doing business. Gia-Lâm's convenient location, just across the river from Hanoi and connected to the city by bridge, gave Hanoi merchants a brief but significant increase in the number of available consumers. This type of temporary relocation seriously undermined the efficacy of the congregation system with regard to its ability to supervise the resident Chinese population, a major source of disquiet for a colonial administration that preferred to monitor the resident Chinese population on a microscopic level.

Bac-Ninh's monthly report provides a clearer idea of the degree of surveillance to which Tonkin's Chinese residents were subjected. In this report, Bac-Ninh's administrator writes,

The Chinese, in the current situation and because of certain scheming, must be the objects of a very particular surveillance. This surveillance is quite easy in Bac-Ninh and in Dap-Câu where the majority of the provinces' Chinese are grouped, most of whom have been established here for a long time and who almost never circulate in the interior.

⁴⁹⁷ Extract from the Monthly Rapport of Bac-Ninh Province, November 1914, TTLTQG1, RST 8680.

There is a Chinese in Tu-Son County⁴⁹⁸ and two more in Thuân-Thanh County who seem peaceful.⁴⁹⁹

In an environment in which Tonkin's resident Chinese community faced judgment on an individual level, the big city businessmen and construction workers who followed the path of the railroad could only have aroused the suspicion of colonial officials.

In principle, a Chinese resident of Hanoi remained under the authority of his Hanoi-based congregation at all times. In practice, however, a congregation could exercise little control over a member who spent extended periods of time far from his city or town of official residency. In November 1914, local French authorities in Bac-Ninh complained bitterly about the lack of supervision over Hanoi-based Chinese working in Gia-Lam, claiming that they ghosted around the province, completely ignored not only by Bac-Ninh's existing congregations, but also by the Hanoi congregations responsible for their behavior.⁵⁰⁰ Disturbed by this report and concerned with potential subversion on the part of Gia-Lam's unsupervised Chinese, Tonkin's Resident Superior ordered Hanoi's Mayor, Logeret, to look into the matter, which the Mayor did by contacting a congregation in Hanoi directly to discuss the problem. Although the documents do not mention a specific congregation by native place name, the answer of the congregation concerned was quite explicit. The congregation in Hanoi acknowledged its inability to provide all but the most cursory attention to its members working in Gia-Lam, and suggested that the same problem would exist were the supervision of Hanoi-based Chinese working in Gia-Lam to be transferred to Bac-Ninh's congregation.⁵⁰¹ Logically, the problems accompanying the

⁴⁹⁸ Literally, "phu."

⁴⁹⁹ Extract from the Monthly Rapport of Bac-Ninh Province, November 1914, TTLTQG1, RST 8680.

⁵⁰⁰ Extract from the Monthly Rapport of Bac-Ninh Province, November 1914, TTLTQG1, RST 8680.

⁵⁰¹ Mayor of Hanoi to Resident Superior of Tonkin, December 1914, TTLTQG1, RST 8680.

transfer of authority over an individual to a place far from the individual's official place of residence seem just as perplexing as the reverse proved to be.

Finally, the Resident Superior himself offered a tentative solution to the dilemma of Chinese surveillance, which involved appointing a special vice-president from the Hanoi-based congregation who would himself be based in Gia-Lam. This individual would assume responsibility for the entire community of Chinese working in Gia-Lam with permanent residency in Hanoi, thus ensuring access to congregational authority for the sojourning Chinese, and reestablishing the accountability of the Hanoi-based congregation on behalf of Tonkin's government.⁵⁰² Although the final resolution of this problem is unknown, the whole scenario offers a clear idea of the immense complexity of the logistical problem engendered by the French desire for total supervision and accountability within Indochina's Chinese communities.

A few years earlier, a circular issued by the Resident Superior of Tonkin sparked a different exchange that reveals the highly mutable situation in the mountainous north during the first years of the 20th-century. In September 1908, J. Morel, the Resident Superior of Tonkin, distributed a circular to all of the Inspectors, Administrators, and Military Commanders under his jurisdiction, demanding that they strictly supervise Tonkin's congregational elections to ensure that only Chinese residents willing to uphold the French regime won the presidential office. In this circular, the Resident Superior also required exhaustive background checks on all Chinese residing in or transiting through Tonkinese territory, not only requiring a Chinese resident's domicile and name, but also his history in the colony, his family history, and any other facts that might give insight into his character.⁵⁰³ This vetting

⁵⁰² Mayor of Hanoi to Resident Superior of Tonkin, December 1914, TTLTQG1, RST 8680.

⁵⁰³ Circular regarding elections of the Presidents of Chinese congregations, September 22, 1908, TTLTQG1, RST 22.502.

was intended to reveal any potential revolutionaries lurking in Tonkin. If reformists were found, the congregational president loyal to the French then assumed the role of enforcer. “They must, in effect, work with the Authorities as the police of their congregation and exercise an active surveillance over their members by making, if necessary, appeals for your [Administrators, Inspectors, and Military Commanders] intervention in the interests of public order.”⁵⁰⁴

Not surprisingly, the two extant responses to the Resident Superior’s circular reveal significant variations from region to region with regard to the Chinese political situation in Tonkin. The president of Cao-Bang’s largest congregation apparently appeased Major LeBlond, the commander in charge of the Second Military Territory, by maintaining that he, the president, understood that he endured in his position by protecting the interests of “those he represent[ed].”⁵⁰⁵ As LeBlond rhapsodized about the virtues of the congregation president, one can only wonder if the people whose interests were represented by the Chinese president were, in fact, the French; however, without clear archival evidence in either direction, we must also consider the possibility that the Cao-Bang president skillfully managed to balance the demands forced upon him by the local administration and the needs of the overseas Chinese community he was elected to represent.

While Cao-Bang’s regional administration expressed satisfaction at the Chinese in their bailiwick, the Administrator in Lang-Son told a very different story. According to Administrator Du Vaure, Lang-Son swarmed with Chinese involved in suspicious activities and the French bureaucrat treated the Resident-Superior’s demand with great skepticism. “Your instructions are very difficult to carry out in the high

⁵⁰⁴ Circular regarding elections of the Presidents of Chinese congregations, September 22, 1908, TTLTQG1, RST 22.502.

⁵⁰⁵ Commander of the Second Military territory to Resident Superior of Tonkin, October 12, 1908, TTLTQG1, RST 22.502.

country,” he wrote. “All of the Chinese who live there are, in effect, without exception, reformists, and although there are two or three large commercial houses, none of them can present any serious guarantee of commercial honorability. We are forced to choose among established shopkeepers, those who seem the most transparent.”⁵⁰⁶

In Lang-Son, a city and province sharing a long swath of border with China, Chinese residents only constituted a part of the Chinese presence in the region. Substantive numbers of migratory Chinese merchants, peddlers, and vagabonds meandered through the border region year round, in direct violation of established French law in Tonkin.⁵⁰⁷ For the French, these individuals represented a significant threat to colonial control and authority, and very little distinction was made between a peddler of traditional medicines and a revolutionary fleeing to Tonkin to avoid the wrath of the Qing dynasty. Not surprisingly, local resident Chinese viewed the situation in a different, if not more nuanced, light. Lang-Son’s Administrator commented that the shopkeepers chosen to head the congregations were unreliable because of their personal acquaintance with reformists lingering in the area. Instead of assisting the French in apprehending these reformists, they helped to hide them. Du Vaure wrote, “They openly protect the reformists and try to hide them, even when this makes them guilty of crimes against common law.”⁵⁰⁸

The two ends of the spectrum represented by Cao-Bang and Lang-Son give a general idea of the wide local and regional variations apparent in French attitudes towards Tonkin’s resident Chinese, as well as painting a picture of the different approaches taken by the Chinese communities themselves in their dealings with local

⁵⁰⁶ Administrator in Lang-Son to Resident Superior, October 12, 1908, TTLTQG1, RST 22.502.

⁵⁰⁷ I have never come across an estimate of the number of non-resident migratory Chinese circulating in the northern border regions.

⁵⁰⁸ Administrator in Lang-Son to Resident Superior, October 12, 1908, TTLTQG1, RST 22.502.

French administration. Cao-Bang was, and is, the type of place one only visits for a reason, a dead end valley high in the mountains populated only by gold mines and the miners who work them. Lang-Son, on the other hand, is a high traffic zone, resting prominently on a main land route to and from China. The vast gulf separating these two places is representative of another issue as well. There is a marked tendency among scholars of French colonialism in Vietnam to view the Chinese congregations as monolithic organizations, perhaps varying in size, but identical in scope and structure. Likewise, it is quite easy to view overseas Chinese residing in French colonial territory as merchants, bankers, or business tycoons served by a selection of Chinese coolies brought to Tonkin or Cochinchina to do their masters' bidding. In fact, as these examples from Tonkin indicate, both the congregations and the general overseas Chinese community were highly adaptable organizations that existed in many forms and represented an infinitely variable population. As such, the basic French blueprint for congregational law was a wall so fragmented that assorted sections of the Chinese community invariably managed to slip through the cracks of institutional supervision.

These details of practice and law may not seem particularly significant at first glance, but they do provide insight into the complicated world of Sino-French interactions and the diverse nature of the overseas Chinese community in Indochina in general. The mining and engineering conglomerates of the northern mountains and the opportunities they offered for profit and anonymity encouraged a very different type of Chinese immigration than did the more typical merchant and transportation companies of the coastal and inland waterways, not to mention the highly developed Chinese networks of the Mekong Delta. Furthermore, the description of the Pia-Ouac miners as a floating population vividly portrays the mobility and the fluidity of Chinese coolies in the north, but more importantly of the Sino-Tonkin border region,

where the labyrinthine natural barrier of the mountains did more to blur political borders than to reinforce them.

Congregational Responsibility: Vouching for Congregation Members

In addition to the unique immigration problems posed by the shared border with China, Indochina suffered from other issues of immigration and congregational responsibility. As discussed in the leadership section of this dissertation, the president of each congregation, as a requirement of his office, guaranteed payment to the French of the full head tax amount due from his congregation, even if the shortfall had to be made up from his personal fortune. This generally meant that congregation presidents took the responsibility of vouching for new and established congregation members quite seriously, a circumstance that applied universally to all regions of Indochina.

Congregations requested that community members be stricken from their rolls for a number of reasons. In the case of Soc Trang's Trieu Chau congregation, ethnicity also played a factor in the removal of two men from the congregation rolls. In the late autumn of 1893, during a hotly contested election, two candidates, Trinh Ngũ and Dương Thành Hiệp, placed their names in the running for congregation president. Neither man received a single vote because, as the Chinese plaintiffs put it, they were "half-bloods and descendants of half-bloods ... but we did not vote for them because they are not Chinese."⁵⁰⁹ The attempt by these two métis members of Soc Trang's Trieu Chau community to wrest power from "legitimate" full-blood Chinese by participating fully in the electoral process within the congregation affronted the entire congregation. Disgruntled by their total lack of support within the congregation, the two men proceeded to "disturb the tranquility of the Congregation."⁵¹⁰ The

⁵⁰⁹ Petition sent by 42 members of the Trieu Chau congrégation to the Administrator of Soc Trang, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.15/157(5).

⁵¹⁰ Petition sent by 42 members of the Trieu Chau congrégation to the Administrator of Soc Trang, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.15/157(5).

response was swift and decisive. Forty-two members of the congregation wrote to the administrator to have the two troublemakers stricken from the congregation's rolls and placed on the register of indigenous residents based on the fact that neither man was Chinese. "As long as they continue to remain in the congregation," insisted the plaintiffs, "they will always give rise to business adverse to public security."⁵¹¹

In 1907, in Annam, the president of Quang Ngai's Fujian congregation repudiated two congregation members, Thai Vat Ky and Thai Luc Ky, both of whom resided in Thach Tru Thon village. According to the president, these men had paid neither their personal nor their commercial taxes for a number of years, leaving it up to the president to make good on their debts. Additionally, the Fujian president alleged them both to be men of evil reputation; although specific incidents were not detailed, they were accused of usury and extortion. As a result of their unreliable natures, the congregation refused to vouch for them any longer, meaning that they faced certain expulsion from the colony.⁵¹² Within two weeks, the order of expulsion had been pronounced and the two men were to be escorted to a ship and sent to Hong Kong at the expense of their congregation.⁵¹³

Thai Luc Ky was banished from the colony, but Thai Vat Ky managed to find a loophole and postpone his escape. Just as he was scheduled for deportation out of Tourane⁵¹⁴ to Hong Kong, Thai Vat Ky found another congregation, the Fujian congregation of Tourane, to vouch for him. Though good fortune might have played a role in his narrow escape, there can be little doubt that networking was also a central factor. Had Thai Vat Ky not possessed sufficient stature or connections within

⁵¹¹ Petition sent by 42 members of the Trieu Chau congregation to the Administrator of Soc Trang, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.15/157(5).

⁵¹² Letter from the Resident Superior in Annam, 17 April 1907, CAOM, INDO GGI 20334.

⁵¹³ Order from the Governor General, 1 May 1907, CAOM, INDO GGI 20334.

⁵¹⁴ Present-day Danang.

Indochina's Fujianese community, he would never have been able to convince them to intercede on his behalf – after all, the hapless Thai Luc Ky was not so lucky – but Thai Vat Ky's story did not end with his close call.

After being rescued by the Tourane congregation, Thai Vat Ky returned to Quang Ngai under the pretense of attending to his business affairs; instead, he resumed his habits of usury. After three weeks in Quang Ngai, he returned to Tourane where he employed a lawyer to intercede with the local administration on his behalf as it concerned the matter of him returning to Quang Ngai for an indefinite length of time to tend to his business. The Resident Superior in Annam, after warning him that no further license would be granted him by the French administration, agreed to Thai Vat Ky's request under two conditions: first, his stay in Quang Ngai province could not exceed one month; and second, if any complaint reached the ears of the administration, he would immediately be expelled from the colony.

Inevitably, during his month in Quang Ngai, complaints about Thai Vat Ky's behavior reached the ears of the Resident, who, true to his word, promptly ordered the man's expulsion from the colony.⁵¹⁵ The Governor general informed Annam's Resident that the expulsion of Thai Vat Ky would have to wait until after a French court found him guilty of the violence and extortion of which he had been accused; however, while French authorities waded through the bureaucratic red tape that preceded any expulsion, Thai Vat Ky took matters into his own hands and fled the province, allegedly to Cochinchina.⁵¹⁶ Thus, Thai Vat Ky illustrates how a single individual, repudiated by his congregation and expelled by French authorities, managed to escape deportation, first through the legal means of finding another

⁵¹⁵ Letter from the Resident Superior in Annam, 1 February 1908, CAOM, INDO GGI 20334.

⁵¹⁶ Letter from the Resident Superior in Annam, 21 February 1908, CAOM, INDO GGI 20334.

congregation willing to vouch for him, and then through the illegal means of fading anonymously into the vast colonial jungle, never to be heard from again.

Conclusion

In China's late imperial period, attacks on Manchu interests across the Tonkin border in China resulted in the Chinese Foreign Minister requesting that France step up its surveillance in the border regions in the hopes of capturing these wanted criminals and extraditing them back to China. This imperial request had the immediate result of putting enormous pressure on Indochina's – specifically Tonkin's – overseas Chinese community. Previously welcome and respectable overseas Chinese found themselves sacrificed to the Imperial government as a result of the French desire to seem cooperative to the failing Celestial Empire. The French Orders of Expulsion emanating from this period sound faintly apologetic, as if the French recognized the harm that they were doing to individuals for the sake of expediency. Nevertheless, the expelled men were forced to seek their fortunes somewhere outside of French territory.

French officials also clashed with congregations over other issues. Disputes over Vietnamese women being allowed to leave Indochina with Chinese men were commonplace, as were conflicts over whether or not Chinese women should be allowed to stay. In Tonkin and Laos, in the mountainous north, drug smuggling, wandering vagabonds, and control of the highland caravanners proved to be sore points with the French administration. In fact, the only real evidence of congregational cooperation with the French as it pertained to matters of crime and immigration concerned the use of the French as a powerful legal recourse to assist Chinese congregations with the expulsion of troublemakers or problem members. At times, as this chapter demonstrates, the Chinese co-opted this authority as well, using French

power to rid themselves of miscreants, but to cleanse the congregation of unwanted members, particularly members of mixed Sino-Vietnamese descent.

CHAPTER 9: CHINESE CERCLES: KINSHIP OR CRIME?

In Indochina during the late 19th century, colonial authorities often agonized over the misdeeds of a type of Chinese organization called a cercle. “Cercle” is a French term often translated as “association” which is used in Indochina to represent organizations bound together by shared interests or personal characteristics, and not all cercles were composed of Chinese members. For example, in the 1920’s, Saigon-Cholon welcomed its first Aeronautical Cercle for airplane aficionados. Likewise, some cercles emerged to bring together members who had all graduated from the same colonial school, or who participated in the same hobbies. For cercles composed entirely of Chinese members, however, the term is better understood as referring to any officially sanctioned group of overseas Chinese who are bound together by commonalities other than dialect.⁵¹⁷ In my opinion, these cercles represented the best and only chance for overseas Chinese in Indochina to create in their own communities the types of segmentations and differentiations that came so naturally to them in their native places. These segmentations were denied them under French congregational law, which recognized only dialect as a viable grouping criterion. It is very easy to dismiss cercles as dens of iniquity, which many of them undoubtedly were; however, this type of unsophisticated perspective completely overlooks the larger questions: how did the Chinese choose to divide themselves within each dialect group, and what larger purpose, if any, did each cercle serve for its members?

⁵¹⁷ This definition should not be understood to mean that cercle members did not speak the same dialect; only that for the most part, the criteria determining membership eligibility did not include dialect. In the very early years of the cercles, there were exceptions to this policy, especially for underrepresented dialect groups who were forced to assimilate within the bounds of a congregation where the majority did not speak their dialect; however, these early groups quickly gave way to cercles based upon shared characteristics such as profession or occupation, rather than language or dialect – most likely because for these groups, a shared dialect was a foregone conclusion.

As this dissertation has already discussed, in any typical Chinese urban setting, whether in Shanghai or Hankow or Singapore, kinship associations existed for the purpose of bringing people from a common background together to help them materially, socially, and spiritually. In cities outside of Indochina, these groups often segmented themselves in meticulous detail, using such characteristics as native county or village, professional occupation, or even combinations of multiple specific factors. This meant, for example, that Singapore had a guild exclusively for carpenters from Taishan and Hankow had a guild for silk dealers from Jiangsu and Zhejiang.⁵¹⁸ French legislation impeded Indochina's Chinese community from developing the same kind of highly detailed social structure and hierarchy that existed in other cities. Therefore, their preoccupation with opium and gambling notwithstanding, cercles also gave these groups the opportunity to establish the social hierarchies and institutions to which they were culturally accustomed. As the following picture suggests, the vast majority of Indochina's overseas Chinese, paralleling the demographics of overseas Chinese communities around the world, were male, bound by ties of kinship and even friendship made stronger by the isolation of colonial life.

Historian Madeline Hsu has addresses this very issue of social bonding in her article, "Exporting Homosociality: Culture and Community in Chinatown America, 1882-1943." In this article, Hsu suggests that the overwhelmingly male population of Chinese in America created, over time, a migrant population that came to value – on a personal level – their relationships and bonds with other men as highly as they valued their more traditional relationships with distant wives and children. She proposes that the lives of these predominantly male Chinese should not be understood "as a perpetual state of unfulfilled longing for wife and children, but as part of a community of men that assumed values and rhythms of life that emphasized, not Confucian

⁵¹⁸ Rowe, *Commerce and Society*, 268.

responsibilities to family and ancestors, but the friendship, fraternity, and honor of bonding with other men.”⁵¹⁹ Careful consideration of the roles of the cercle with regard to the social relationships and personal loyalties of Indochina’s overseas Chinese adds another significant, if intangible, dimension to our understanding of these types of institutions. It also gives us insight into why overseas Chinese pursued the creation of these cercles so indefatigably.



Figure 19 Chinese from Quang-Si⁵²⁰

The issue of Chinese clubs and associations in Indochina deserves special attention in its own right. From the perspective of the French administration, Chinese *Cercles* proved quite problematic because they often operated unfettered by the strict regulations and established leadership hierarchy that stabilized the other major Chinese organization in Indochina, the *congrégation*. This chapter will discuss the notion commonly put forth by colonial French administrators that Chinese *cercles* were bastions of crime and evil-doing. In addition to describing the basic nature and

⁵¹⁹ Madeline Hsu, “Exporting Homosociality: Culture and Community in Chinatown America, 1882-1943,” (unpublished), 24.

⁵²⁰ http://images.google.com/imgres?imgurl=http://hinhxua.free.fr/autrefois/chinois/Cholon_la_processi_on_du_dragon.jpg&imgrefurl=http://hinhxua.free.fr/autrefois/chinois/photo_chinois_vn.htm&h=457&w=719&sz=97&tbnid=BguALW0gyy0tqM:&tbnh=88&tbnw=139&hl=en&start=2&p. Feb 12, 2006.

roles of *cercles* for the larger Chinese community in Indochina, this chapter seeks to define the function of the cercles in the overseas Chinese community, discussing the manner in which cercles assumed several of the community responsibilities traditionally delegated to the *huiguan* in order to ensure the smooth functioning of each specific congrégation without explicitly violating laws put forth by the French administration.

As established earlier in this study, Nguyễn law established strict policies for the existence and operation of Chinese institutions in Annamite territory long before the arrival of the French. In the early years of their tenure in Indochina, the French adopted this system with very few revisions, but by the 1880's, French-oriented organizations known as cercles emerged by the hundreds in major urban centers across the region. What role did these cercles play in Indochina's overseas Chinese communities? How did they appear and why did the overseas Chinese adopt this originally French institution so enthusiastically?

The answer to these questions can be traced back to the urban Chinese environments upon which many overseas Chinese institutions were based. In China, social and business groups did not use dialect as their sole differentiating characteristic. Instead, formal and informal groups and associations merged together and drifted apart based on native county or town, specific occupation,⁵²¹ secret society affiliation, or some combination of the three. Chinese cities possessed hundreds, even thousands, of these alliances, representing a desire for affiliation clearly impossible under the Nguyễn-based rules governing the overseas Chinese. The early tenure of the French allowed a sudden freedom in Chinese-oriented restrictions. As French institutions took hold in Indochina and more and more colons settled in the territories,

⁵²¹ By specific occupation, I am referring to a segmentation beyond broader categories like construction and into specifics such as bricklayers or cement workers.

French cercles began to emerge to meet French interests, interests that were often recreational in nature.⁵²² Apparently seizing the chance to expand their own institutional interests, Chinese congregations quickly grabbed the opportunity to organize cercles of their own. For the Chinese, cercles represented the best opportunity to recreate the diversity of the mainland Chinese urban environment.

Although congrégations retained their status as the preeminent Chinese institutions of the French colonial period, they were not homogenous institutions representing a bland and ubiquitous clientele. Within the congrégations, members separated themselves into a number of divisions and subdivisions based upon such shared characteristics as native village or county, occupation, or even home country.⁵²³ In Indochina, these subdivisions were often referred to as “*cercles*.” Inevitably, certain Cercles or factions with a specific congrégation participated in leisure activities outlawed by the French. Gambling seems to have been the preferred downfall of these organizations which often deteriorated into after-hours, members-only casinos which served no other noticeable purpose except to provide a venue for illicit games and a social outlet for their members.

When the French discovered these illicit activities, retribution was swift and multi-faceted. First, they arrested all of the individual Chinese men who were known to have been involved with the gambling ring. As these arrests usually occurred during a nighttime raid on a suspected gambling den, the guilt of those arrested was more or

⁵²² Such as the Cercles Sportif, Airplane cercles, etc.

⁵²³ Indochina hosted several groups and societies intended to represent, for example, Singaporean or Malaysian Chinese. Although these Chinese were based outside of China proper, they were still required to affiliate themselves with a congrégation upon their arrival in Indochina. Thus, a Cantonese merchant based in Singapore was required by French law to affiliate himself with a Chinese congrégation if he desired to work or live in Indochina. This requirement existed even if the merchant in question had never actually been to his native Cantonese place and had spent his entire life in Singapore or Malaysia. The only exceptions to this rule concerned ethnic Chinese citizens of western nations (i.e., a Singaporean Cantonese merchant with British citizenship).

less a foregone conclusion. Implicated individuals faced individual trial on individual charges and were most often sentenced to a fine, a prison term of varying lengths, and immediate expulsion from the colony upon their release from prison; however, justice did not end there. In addition to punishing those directly responsible for the wrongdoing, the Cercle whose members were involved was disbanded and the congrégation with which the Cercle was affiliated faced fines and repercussions of its own.

Ultimately, a congrégation was unlikely to be disbanded over such an incident. Final responsibility for any infractions committed by members of a congrégation rested firmly upon the shoulders of the congrégation's president. As Nguyen Quốc Đình writes in his 1941 examination of the congrégation system and colonial law, "All infractions of Indochinese law and of the provisions of the decree of 1935 committed by a congrégation are imputed to its president; he is the one who is personally incriminated: he is punished, and this may include depriving him of his liberty."⁵²⁴ In fact, for the regions of Annam and Tonkin, French law explicitly limited the liability of the congrégations from the actions of its members to "acts of rebellion against France, serious political troubles, or actions which disturb the general safety, which do not fall under ordinary penal laws."⁵²⁵ Even in one of three above-mentioned cases, the decree limited financial damages to the amount required "to provide the Administration with the means of putting down these disorders and insuring that they do not recur."⁵²⁶ Despite the fact that Cochinchina often served as the proving ground for laws concerning the Chinese population and the congrégations, no such law limited

⁵²⁴ Nguyen Quoc Dinh, *The Chinese Congregations*, 88.

⁵²⁵ Article 3 of the decree of October 11, 1905 as quoted in Nguyen Quoc Dinh, *The Chinese Congregations*, 171.

⁵²⁶ Article 3 of the decree of October 11, 1905 as quoted in Nguyen Quoc Dinh, *The Chinese Congregations*, 171.

punitive damages levied upon or the criminal responsibility of Cochinchinese congregations. Not until 1935 did legislation emerge that limited the responsibility of the congregation in the event of malfeasance by a congregation member in Cochinchina.⁵²⁷

The late 1870's and early 1880's were busy years for Chinese cercles in Cholon and Saigon. In the spring of 1878, Cholon's Phuoc Chau community wrote a letter to Cholon's Administrator for Indigenous Affairs asking that they be allowed to open their own cercle. Prior to 1874, the Phuoc Kien congregation had actually been three separate congregations, each with their own leader: the Phuoc Chau, the Toan Chau, and the Chuong Chau. Accordingly, in Cholon, each of these groups had their own pagoda. After the merger of these three groups into the Phuoc Kien congregation, the Phuoc Chau community found congregation life increasingly onerous, because of the significant differences between their dialect and those of the Chuong Chau and Toan Chau's. To ease those communications difficulties and create an environment more conducive to their business and leisure activities, the Phuoc Chau asked permission to open their own cercle in Cholon.⁵²⁸ Their request was endorsed by the Administrator and forwarded to the governor later that month. The following is a modern picture of the Phuoc An *huiguan* in Cholon, providing us with some idea of the gathering places frequented by congregation and cercle members alike.

Requests to establish cercles were not necessarily approved as a matter of course. In July 1878, the Phuoc Kien congregation requested permission to open a Phuoc Kien cercle in Saigon "for no other purpose than to provide a meeting place for

⁵²⁷ Article 3 of the decree of October 11, 1905 as quoted in Nguyen Quoc Dinh, *The Chinese Congregations*, 172-3.

⁵²⁸ Letter from the Phuoc Chau businessmen, 17 April 1878, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.6/205(3).



Figure 20 Phuoc An Huiguan, Cholon⁵²⁹

the different shopkeepers of the congregation to freely show their faces and to entertain one another honestly, or to deal with their business.”⁵³⁰ The congregation cited the existence in Cholon of two Cantonese cercles as a motivating factor behind their request. They also commented that the third cercle, composed of Chinese from different congregations, failed to meet the social and business needs of the Phuoc Kien community.⁵³¹ Allowing for a spirit of inter-congregational competition, this letter can be interpreted as follows: the Cantonese had two cercles and the Fujianese wanted a cercle of their own. Despite the willingness of the Phuoc Kien congregation to meet all of the requirements of French law, margin notes scribbled onto the petition indicate

⁵²⁹ Taken by the author, 2002.

⁵³⁰ Letter from the Phuoc Kien congregation, 20 July 1878, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.6/205(3).

⁵³¹ While Saigon might have only had three Chinese cercles, at the time this petition was written, Cholon had at least three, representing the Cantonese, Trieu Chau, and Phuoc Kien communities.

that this request to open a cercle was refused by the office of the Governor General for reasons unknown.⁵³²

By 1880, the Phuoc Kien cercle in Cholon had stumbled into difficult times. Around 9 pm on August 4, 1880, while strolling down the Rue de Paris in Cholon, Cholon's Chief Constable noticed a large number of Chinese wandering in and out of the Phuoc Kien congregation house, even though the main rooms of the house seemed empty. Suspicious, he came in for a closer look, only to discover that the Chinese were entering and leaving through a door concealed by the building's stairway. Inside the door, he saw around 60 Chinese gathered at a table clearly involved in some sort of game of chance. As he approached the room, a sentry called out the alarm; Chinese scattered in all directions and he entered to find it empty of people, property, or goods. After that incident, he warned the cercle's president, Ta Chanh Nguon, that would have to submit a report on the incident.⁵³³ French tolerance of Chinese rule-breaking was in short supply; on August 16, judgment was officially pronounced. Cholon's Phuoc Kien cercle was closed and the 1,000 piastre guarantee it had offered as proof of its legitimacy was forfeited to the local treasury and to the city of Cholon.⁵³⁴

Malfeasance on the part of cercle members was not always required for a cercle to be closed. On November 15, 1879, police rushed to the premises of Cholon's Trieu Chau cercle to break up a large brawl that was underway there. According to police reports, the fracas began when employees of the cercle got into a fight with eleven Chinese who were not members of the cercle over the game of chance they were playing together. In the process of intervening, police arrested several of the Chinese involved and also confiscated nearly 300 francs in cash that they found at the

⁵³² Letter from the Phuoc Kien congregation, 20 July 1878, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.6/205(3).

⁵³³ Letter from the Chief Constable, 4 August 1880, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.6/205(3).

⁵³⁴ Arrêté from the Director of the Interior, 16 August 1880, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.6/205(3).

scene;⁵³⁵ however, other than in the initial police report, no mention is made of Trieu Chau participants in the melee. The Municipal President commented that “None of the cercle members was present; the individuals who were arrested are foreigners, Phuoc Kien Chinese and Akas who come to gamble.”⁵³⁶ The list of those arrested included a member of the Hainam congregation whose residence was in France, a member of the Phuoc Kien congregation whose name was inscribed illegally on the rolls of the Trieu Chau Cercle, and one Chinese with French residency who had no congregational affiliation.⁵³⁷ Despite the conspicuous absence of any bona fide Trieu Chau Cercle members on the list of those apprehended, on November 22, 1879, the Cercle was closed for its violations, and its 1,000 piastre guarantee was confiscated by the treasury as penalty.⁵³⁸

Although native place paid a nearly ubiquitous role in determining the boundaries along which cercles divided themselves, other more refined characteristics also defined the organizations. In 1884, for example, 12 merchants from Cholon’s Hainam congregation sent a petition to the Director of the Interior asking permission to establish a “Cercle of Hainam Traders.”⁵³⁹ In 1886, the Cantonese congregation applied for and received permission to open an occupationally based cercle, the “Cercle of Suppliers and [Rice] Huskers of the Cantonese Congregation.”⁵⁴⁰ Just two months later, the same Cantonese congregation of Cholon sought to establish a cercle just for the Cantonese rice brokers. The French were distinctly disapproving of this request as they felt the Cantonese were taking advantage of French benevolence by seeking to open another cercle and also could not imagine why every aspect of the rice

⁵³⁵ Letter from the Chief Constable, 14 November 1879, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.6/205(3).

⁵³⁶ Letter from the Municipal President, 14 November 1879, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.6/205(3).

⁵³⁷ Handwritten List of Arrested Chinese, no date, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.6/205(3).

⁵³⁸ Governor’s Report, 22 November 1879, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.6/205(3).

⁵³⁹ Petition from Hainam’s Merchants, 30 April 1884, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.6/205(4).

⁵⁴⁰ Letter from the Mayor of Cholon, 12 March 1886, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.6/205(4).

trade required its own association.⁵⁴¹ As late as 1908, Cholon possessed a “Cercle for Chinese Businessmen and for Trieu Chau.”⁵⁴²

In rural areas far from the comfort of Cholon’s Chinatown, Chinese businessmen also sought to open cercles, this time with much broader membership. Typical of these cases was the request to open a Chinese cercle in Vinh Long. The Chinese merchants emphasized the importance of the town as a stopover on the route from Cholon to Phnom Penh, and together, the Cantonese, Phuoc Kien, and Trieu Chau congregations sought permission to open a cercle to support the needs of their community and of the important businessmen that stopped in Vinh Long on their way from market center to market center.⁵⁴³ In another instance, Cholon-based Singapore Chinese sought to open their own cercle in the city, a request which was granted in 1878.⁵⁴⁴ The formation of this type of organization closely mirrors the establishment of guilds and native place associations in China as well. The farther one got from the major urban center, the broader the guild membership criteria became. In other words, native place associations from the province of Guangzhou, if located in the city of Canton, would likely be differentiated on a village-by-village level. If, on the other hand, residents of Canton who originally hailed from Shandong formed an association, the group quite likely would have been provincially inclusive. In some cases, natives from more than one distant province formed guilds together to deepen their networks and systems of support.

Apart from issues of networking and companionship, Indochina’s Chinese cercles were not above using the French to their own advantage in competitions

⁵⁴¹ Letter from the Mayor of Cholon, 5 May 1886, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH 3/137(27).

⁵⁴² Confidential Note from Cholon’s Chief Constable, 16 April 1908, CAOM, INDO GGI 50220.

⁵⁴³ Request by three Chinese congregations, date unknown (1884), TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.6/201(2).

⁵⁴⁴ Request by the Singapore Chinese, 14 October 1878, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.6/205(5).

between cercles, or between congregations. In 1880, an anonymous complaint generated, unsigned, from the “Phuoc Kien businessmen” aimed specifically to destroy the Hainanese cercle and to tarnish the reputation of the congregation with which it was affiliated. This accusation alleged that gambling dens existed on a certain street in Cholon, and gave the address and details of the crimes carried out at that secret location. The anonymous tipsters clearly wanted no stone left unturned.

We come, as a consequence, to ask you, Mr. Governor, to send a civil servant accompanied by annamite agents and by Chinese in order to encircle the aforementioned gambling house and, at the same time, guard the neighborhoods around the house, to avoid allowing gamblers to escape and to dissipate the obstacles that could result (if these measures were not taken).⁵⁴⁵

The French, well aware of the recent enmity between the Phuoc Kien and Hainam communities, were not bothered by the fact that they were being used to settle old scores. The opportunity to eliminate a large scale gambling ring was too good to let pass. Furthermore, the guilt or innocence of the Hainanese was never at question. When the raid occurred, no games were in progress and no gambling paraphernalia was found; however, French investigators felt that the floor plan and difficult access to various parts of the house were sure signs of guilt. When questioned, the vice president of the congregation did not flatly deny that gambling had occurred in the establishment. Instead, he said that no gambling had occurred since the death of the congregation president two days before. That was enough of a confession for the police, and the poor Hainanese cercle was left to suffer the consequences of its infraction.⁵⁴⁶

⁵⁴⁵ Anonymous Complaint from Phuoc Kien businessmen, no date (1880), TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.6/205(2).

⁵⁴⁶ Letter from the Mayor of Cholon, 19 October 1880, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.6/205(2).

The events detailed by Cholon's Chief Constable on August 4, 1880 played out again and again in the following years when Chinese cercles rose to the public eye. In October of the same year, three more cercles, those belonging to the Cantonese, the Hakkas, and the Hainanese, were also closed for gambling infractions.⁵⁴⁷ As with the cercles that had preceded them, their guarantees were confiscated⁵⁴⁸ and the agents who discovered the misdeeds were awarded forty piastres as reward for their diligence.⁵⁴⁹ In fact, the inability or unwillingness to ensure that cercles remained law-abiding was one of the motivating factors in their eventual proscription under French law. Already short of patience with these organizations, Cochinchina's Lieutenant Governor responded brusquely to a letter from the Mayor of Cholon that suggested that the Chinese community was being unfairly persecuted by the government when it came to the cercles. The Lieutenant Governor cited Article 291 of the Decree of May 16, 1880, a clause dealing with associations and illicit meetings, in his rebuttal:

It is important to apply this last article strictly and rigorously to Chinese cercles. As a consequence, all of them that contain more than twenty members should be required to submit their statutes for examination by superior authorities and to be authorized by an order of Mr. Governor general to operate validly. [If they fail] to submit to these legal prescriptions, they should be considered opened illegally and consequently closed...

These are not, it seems, measures intended "to irritate" the Chinese population and, in particular, the representatives of the big business, towards whom I am quite inclined to show great benevolence, on the condition however that they cannot for a single moment think themselves above the law... In any case, close surveillance, although friendly, should continue to be exercised so as to avoid occurrences like those that motivated the closing in 1888 of the cercle of the "Cantonese" in which, says the preamble to the order of August 11,

⁵⁴⁷ Letter to the Mayor of Cholon, 28 October 1880, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.6/205(4).

⁵⁴⁸ Letter from the Mayor of Cholon, 29 October 1880, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.6/205(4).

⁵⁴⁹ Arrêté from the Governor of Cochinchina, 25 October 1880, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.6/205(4).

1888, it was established that 278 Chinese were engaged in the game of baquan.

I would, in any case, be surprised that the Chinese meet in these cercles for the sole purpose of handling commercial business there. Parties frequently get organized there and, if my information is exact, invitations to these entertainments are not subjected to very rigorous formalities. It is this fact in particular which merits your diligent attention.⁵⁵⁰

In fact, a small war erupted between, Outrey, the Lieutenant Governor of Cochinchina, and Drouhet, the Mayor of Cholon, over the cercle issue. The Lieutenant Governor, along with most of Cochinchina's constabulary, viewed the Mayor as overly lenient, especially with wealthy Chinese merchants and blamed Drouhet personally for much of the trouble with Chinese cercles and gambling in Cholon. Discussing the aftermath of the 1888 incident in which nearly 300 Cantonese were arrested in a raid on a single game of chance, Outrey comments that in 1893, Governor General de Lanessan suppressed all of Cholon's cercles as a result of their unreliability when it came to games of chance.⁵⁵¹ The goal of this action was to resume tolerance of Chinese associations in a much more discriminating fashion, thereby eliminating many of the public disorders and episodes of law-breaking that seemed to follow in the cercles' wakes. Outrey implies that Drouhet is largely to blame for the failure of this plan, writing, "Since this time, without any new authorization, these establishments have opened again under the pretext of facilitating commercial transactions. The creators of these cercles in effect content themselves with presenting a request to obtain the approval of Cholon's municipality, which always grants it without worrying about current views on the question⁵⁵²." The mayor, for his part, insulted the skill and the

⁵⁵⁰ Letter from the Lieutenant Governor p.i. of Cochinchina, 27 April 1908, CAOM, INDO GGI 50220.

⁵⁵¹ This suppression only lasted briefly, but all of the Chinese cercles operating at the time of de Lanessan's decree were formally closed.

⁵⁵² Letter from the Lieutenant Governor p.i. of Cochinchina, 30 April 1908, CAOM, INDO GGI 50220.

wits of the Lieutenant Governor and his local police, saying, “My simplistic spirit refuses to understand why it would be a mistake to tolerate rich Chinese business owners in Cholon meeting in establishments where it is not established that one plays, while gambling spreads openly in the heart of Saigon, in the presence of the most eminent members of the judicial service, and in a cercle where entry is certainly less difficult than in Cholon's Chinese cercles.”⁵⁵³

The entrepreneurial spirit of some of Indochina's overseas Chinese occasionally shined through the interactions between the Chinese and French. In one particularly noteworthy incident, two Hanoi based Chinese, Lao Tzong Sanh⁵⁵⁴ and Nam San, actually sent, unbidden, competing bids for the rights to manage Chinese cercles in Hanoi, Haiphong, and Nam Đinh. The only catch for the French was that all forms of gambling, save for two deemed particularly dangerous, would be allowed.⁵⁵⁵ Essentially, these men lobbied for a Chinese controlled revenue farm for Chinese gambling, a move seen as undesirable, audacious, and slightly bemusing by the French, who immediately refused.⁵⁵⁶

Tonkin was also not immune to the problems posed by Chinese cercles in Indochina. At least one Chinese cercle already existed in Hanoi, inaugurated jointly by Hanoi's Cantonese and Phuoc Kien congregations, and functional since 1886.⁵⁵⁷ By 1889, a multitude of requests to open cercles in Haiphong had descended upon the Residency. The Cantonese request came in January,⁵⁵⁸ and in April, the “Cercle de Commerçants” added their request as well, reminding the administration that such

⁵⁵³ Letter from the Mayor of Cholon, 16 April 1908, CAOM, INDO GGI 50220.

⁵⁵⁴ Lao Tzong Sanh was president of Hanoi's Cantonese congregation at the time of his request.

⁵⁵⁵ Letter from Lao Tzong Sanh, 26 October 1897; Letter from Nam San, 18 November 1897, TTLTQG1, RST 1566.

⁵⁵⁶ Letter from the Resident Superior, 31 December 1897, TTLTQG1, RST 1566.

⁵⁵⁷ Decision opening a Chinese Cercle in Haiphong, 26 October 1886, TTLTQG1, RST 1571.

⁵⁵⁸ Request to open a Cantonese Cercle in Haiphong, 14 January 1889, TTLTQG1, RST 1567.

associations were freely available to Europeans in the colony and even to the Chinese in Saigon and Cholon.⁵⁵⁹ In July, 16 Chinese, most of whom fell into the bottom two categories of the personal tax, asked permission to open a “Chinese Cercle,” for use by “prominent businessmen” in the city.⁵⁶⁰ Cholon’s mayor preferred the idea of a Chinese cercle because, endorsed by the local Chinese congregation, the single pan-Chinese cercle seemed the easiest way to control the rampant problems of illegal gambling in the city.⁵⁶¹

By the end of the century, the tide still had not shifted, and cercles opened and were closed, stuck in a bewildering and endless cycle of requests, approvals or refusals, criminal inquests, brawls, gambling rings, and excuses. The cercle fever even spread to the borderlands, when the president of the Chinese congregation in Ky-Lua village in Lang-son asked permission to open a cercle in his town. A military territory at the time of the request, Lang-son proved to be too much of a stretch for Tonkin’s administration, who refused permission with very little debate.⁵⁶²

One of the most difficult issues to grapple with when pursuing an examination of Chinese Cercles in Indochina is the apparent inconsistency of the colonial administration when it came to allowing their existence or prohibiting it. From 1878, Chinese cercles had operated in French territory under the condition that they provide a 1000 piastre bond, intended to guarantee their compliance with French law.⁵⁶³ On June 19, 1886, all Chinese cercles in Cochinchina were closed for business. Cercles were given three days to cease operations, but their guarantees were to be returned to

⁵⁵⁹ Request to open a Businessmen’s’ Cercle in Haiphong, 4 April 1889, TTLTQG1, RST 1567.

⁵⁶⁰ Request to open a Chinese Cercle in Haiphong, 22 July 1889, TTLTQG1, RST 1567.

⁵⁶¹ Letter from the Mayor of Haiphong, 29 July 1889, TTLTQG1, RST 1567.

⁵⁶² Requests to open a Chinese cercle in Lang-son, 1897, TTLTQG1, RST 1574.

⁵⁶³ Decision of the Commodore Governor of French Cochinchina, 31 January 1878, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.6/205(7).

them.⁵⁶⁴ The government had grown weary of the many infractions of local law, nearly all of which involved some form of gambling; however, after more than two years of constant pressure to allow the establishment of Chinese cercles to resume, the Lieutenant Governor capitulated. On June 27, 1888, the right to establish cercles resumed, albeit with very strict regulations.⁵⁶⁵ Five years later, a period of time during which one Cantonese Cercle was closed for holding a gambling event that resulted in the arrests of nearly 300 people, Indochina's Governor General once again shut down all of the Chinese cercles. This time, they had three days to cease their operations but the treasury confiscated their guarantees.⁵⁶⁶

Gambling

In 1895, local police came upon a large group of Chinese who were gambling at the entrance to Đông Khê village in Haiphong province. Included in the group, among other professions, were three coolies, two merchants, a sailor, a carpenter, and an entrepreneur, and they ranged in age from 21 to 46. Eleven individuals were arrested, all of whom claimed to be employed by houses in or around Haiphong, but Haiphong's Chief of Police suspected that several of them were actually professional gamblers, because they were arrested with a significant quantity of gambling paraphernalia in their possession.⁵⁶⁷ This type of subterfuge was not uncommon in Indochina. It was particularly a problem in the large mining compounds in the northern mountains, where men dressed as coolies actually did no work, but lived off the proceeds of gambling, or were supported by local secret societies.⁵⁶⁸

⁵⁶⁴ Order suppressing Chinese cercles, 19 June 1886, CAOM, INDO GGI 24699.

⁵⁶⁵ Order regulating Chinese cercles, 27 June 1888, TTLTQG1, RST 1564.

⁵⁶⁶ Order suppressing Chinese cercles in Saigon and Cholon, 9 December 1893, CAOM, INDO GGI 24703.

⁵⁶⁷ Letter from Haiphong's Police Chief, 14 February 1895, TTLTQG1, RST 30992.

⁵⁶⁸ Extract from the Monthly Report, September 1902, TTLTQG1, RST 8913.

Haiphong was, at the time, plagued by illegal gambling rings that targeted local markets. This fact, combined with the general belief in the unsavory nature of gambling Chinese, resulted in a more radical reaction from the police who, fully supported by Haiphong's Resident, pushed for very stiff penalties for the lawbreakers. Eleven of the gamblers were arrested and expelled from the colony. Of the expelled men, 10 of them hailed from Canton, and the 11th man was from Hong Kong.⁵⁶⁹ Not surprisingly, in the transcripts of their interrogations, none of the eleven admitted to gambling. The excuses they offered were varied, including coming to Dong Khé to worship at the pagoda, to look for work in the town, or to meet up with local friends; however, their protestations of innocence did them no good, and they were expelled.⁵⁷⁰



Figure 21 Haiphong, Rue Chinoise⁵⁷¹

The preceding photograph of Haiphong's Chinatown in the early 20th century gives us some idea of the size and significance of the overseas Chinese community in that northern port city.

⁵⁶⁹ Letter from Haiphong's Police Chief, 14 February 1895, TTLTQG1, RST 30992.

⁵⁷⁰ Transcript of Interrogations, 11 February 1895, TTLTQG1, RST 30992.

⁵⁷¹ <http://www.nguyenphuococ.com/hinhxua/hinhxua.htm>. Feb 12, 2006.

While French anti-gambling paranoia was not always wrong, neither was it always right, and the Tonkinese authorities occasionally showed little interest in justice. Such was the case with the Ly Siou Meng affair. Ly Siou Meng appeared before a tribunal to face charges stemming from his arrest in a police sting for operating a gambling house in Hanoi on October 8, 1909. In spite of Ly Siou Meng's acquittal, Hanoi's police chief remained convinced of his guilt and determined to punish him, regardless of the decisions of the French court. "I am going to propose at once to the Mayor the expulsion of the Chinese, Ly Siou Meng, whose guilt, despite the acquittal that intervened in his favor, is not in any doubt."⁵⁷²

Apparently, the Resident Superior viewed the police chief's request with favor, because the matter quickly escalated once the proposed expulsion became known. Ly Siou Meng managed, by means unknown, to enlist the aid of a well-known French lawyer in Hanoi to oppose the expulsion on his behalf. Hanoi's police chief insisted that the hiring of the lawyer was solid proof of the complicity of Hanoi's congregations in the gambling ring. He argued compellingly that a Chinese worker with no apparent means of support could never have afforded such an attorney on his own, which to him, "appears to prove that it hit close to home for the big financiers of gambling in Hanoi."⁵⁷³

The truth of this matter will never be known, and neither will the results of Ly Siou Meng's attempted expulsion; however, this case brings a number of interesting issues to light. First, Hanoi's police superintendent seems to have been so invested in the outcome of this particular case that the truth took a backseat to punishment, whether the accused party was guilty or not. This speaks powerfully to French stereotypes about Chinese in Indochina: their simultaneously indolent and financially

⁵⁷² Letter to the Resident Superior in Hanoi, 12 October 1909, TTLTQG1, RST 13635.

⁵⁷³ Letter to the Resident Superior in Hanoi, 14 October 1909, TTLTQG1, RST 13635.

cunning natures, and their propensity towards gambling and crime. Secondly, it shows the power of a congregation to intervene at any level of justice to pursue a fair, or perhaps merely desired, outcome for one of its members. Whether or not Ly Siou Meng was guilty of the crimes pinned to him, his case shows the willingness of the congregation to take on French authorities on French terms and on a battleground of French choosing. It also indicates that, for the Chinese community, not all such confrontations were doomed to failure.

The notion that all overseas Chinese whiled away their time at gambling tables does a gross injustice to the upstanding merchants who experienced firsthand the tragedies induced by the pastime. In 1887, the Haiphong-based merchant Tchang Sam wrote a heart-wrenching letter to Tonkin's Resident, begging that gambling be abolished in the area.

I have the honor to notify your Excellence of a regrettable act which has just taken place in my family and which would militate once again in favor of the abolition of gambling houses.

Here are the facts: For about ten months, two children were entrusted to me to introduce them to the municipality. Their conduct was perfect during all this time and I did nothing but praise them to their father who had entrusted them to me.

Recently, [I had] business in Haïdzuong. I had to send my two youths to this city with eleven hundred piastres worth of goods with which they immediately made a profit of five hundred piastres, making a total of seventeen hundred piastres. Haïdzuong regrettably possesses one gaming house. My two employees went there and lost this sum in one night. The next day, one of them poisoned himself with some opium and the other one drowned himself. I leave it to you to judge the pain felt by me and by their father at this dreadful piece of news.

I inform you of this event, Sir Minister, but there are a thousand others who each carry the despair and the ruin of our families, and who demonstrate the deep immorality of the freedom to open gambling houses.

I leave for your consideration, Sir Minister, the care of judging the disastrous consequences of a similar freedom and the catastrophes that it can cause for our families.⁵⁷⁴

“A thousand others” is undoubtedly a great understatement.

In Indochina, all games of chance were strictly regulated, even simple carnival games such as those seen at fairs and festivals. One such activity that was endemic in the region, the *jeu de massacre*, or massacre game, involved throwing darts or balls and small doll-like figures. If successful, the thrower won things like tobacco, soap, cookies, sugar, or matches. Records from 1907 show the popularity of the traveling game as a means of existence, but more importantly, they give insight into the life patterns of Chinese choosing this game for a living. As a point of reference, the gamesmen discussed in the following pages were all members of Chinese congregations in Cholon. Despite the fact that they typically slipped between the cracks of colonial surveillance, they remained officially inscribed on congregational rolls.

The 51 year old Cantonese man, Hua Tuoc, turned to the game after years of personal financial disasters. Hua Tuoc had lived in Indochina for twenty years, the first ten of which he spent in Cholon operating a smithy. A poor businessman, he was forced to close his forge and turn to the salt industry, but he left the salt business after 6 years to move to Ha Tien and open his own public transportation service. Unfortunately, an epizootic struck the region and nearly all of his horses perished. After that disastrous twist of fate, Hua Tuoc decided to abandon Indochina and return to his native place; however, in early 1906, he returned to Indochina – this time to Kampot – to try his hand at business once more. Once again, his business acumen

⁵⁷⁴ Letter from the Chinese Tchang Sam, 9 September 1887, TTLTQG1, RST 3077.

failed him; in an apparent last resort, Hua Tuoc arrived in Cholon to acquire permission to run carnival games for a living.⁵⁷⁵

Not all gamesmen had such a poor track record. In July of the same year, the 30 year old Cantonese Dương Dương sought a license of his own to run the massacre game in Cochinchina. Arriving in Indochina in 1898, he worked for four years as a cook for various Chinese businesses. After awhile, he became friends with another Cantonese man named Phung Mao, who was a fairground gamester. The two men traveled the breadth of Cochinchina repeatedly during their association, but in June of 1907, Phung Mao returned to China, taking the license to practice games of chance with him. Accordingly, Dương Dương returned to the city to get a license of his own and continue the life that seems to have suited him so well.⁵⁷⁶

The final example, that of the Cantonese Cao Dương, is different from either of the first two. Born in 1874 in the village of Phuong Yu in Guangdong, Cao Dương traveled to Indochina at the age of twenty, where he found employment piloting the rowboats owned by various Chinese businesses in Phnom Penh. In 1905, Cao Dương returned to Canton, but by 1907, he was back in Saigon, this time seeking a career as a traveling gamesman.⁵⁷⁷

Some men received their licenses and some did not, but two aspects of these stories deserve our attention. First, the French intolerance of gambling and the regulations that controlled it extended down significantly farther than repression of illegal gambling rings in rural villages or congregation houses. Even the right to gamble matches at a fair was tightly controlled and there was no guarantee that an individual, even one with a clean criminal record, would be allowed to pursue such a

⁵⁷⁵ Letter from the Central Police Commissioner, 14 June 1907, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.6/211.

⁵⁷⁶ Letter from the Central Police Commissioner, 17 August 1907, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.6/211.

⁵⁷⁷ Letter from the Central Police Commissioner, 12 September 1907, TTLTQG2, GOUCOCH IA.6/211.

career. Secondly, the portraits painted of these men are instructive in their detail. They reveal a highly mobile society, where residence could shift from place to place within Cochinchina, or even from Cochinchina to Cambodia and back again, without causing a ripple of notice. The same porousness seems to have applied to the Chinese border, as two of the three men discussed above returned to their native places at will, Hua Tuoc because difficult times befell him, and Cao Duong for reasons unknown. Nevertheless, the fact that Chinese who clearly did not fit the mold of wealthy Congregationalists, but were nevertheless members in good standing of Indochinese Chinese congregations, could venture between Indochina and China is worthy of remark.

Conclusion

Yen Ching-hwang attributes the Chinese gambling problem in Singapore and Malaya to simple addiction, the lack of strict social pressure or “adult” supervision to curb the wilder instincts of young Chinese men, and the promise of a quick return in the face of the grinding poverty of daily life.⁵⁷⁸ All of these are interesting and insightful sociological theories, but they fail to adequately explain a phenomenon prevalent in the *Sûreté* records from Indochina. In the raids on illegal gambling establishments in Cochinchina, all of those arrested were men, nearly all of those arrested were in their twenties or early thirties, and the vast majority hailed from a specific sub-ethnic region. In fact, one could even go so far as to say that nearly all of them belonged to the same clan or kinship organization, as the raids usually occurred on congregation property and the congregation leaders, who inevitably claimed no knowledge of the clandestine crime ring flourishing under their noses, were held responsible for the activity by the French authorities.

⁵⁷⁸ Yen, *Community and Politics*, 132-134. For further information, Chapter 5 of this book provides an extensive discussion of the issue of gambling in overseas Chinese communities.

I would like to put forth a different explanation than the one proffered by Yen Ching-hwang. I believe that these *Maisons des Jeux*, like the cercles from which they so often degenerated, served as de facto social clubs for men, especially young men, of the *Gong* class, who by virtue of their lowly status had severely restricted access to the less deleterious clubs and pastimes frequented by their more well-to-do “kin.” In this sense, from an institutional perspective, illegal gambling rings are an extension of the kinship-based clubs and societies. The illegality of their activities vis-à-vis the colonial administration makes them clandestine and the social class of the Chinese participants makes them more or less anathema to “respectable” members of the overseas Chinese community. Additionally, if wealthy Chinese wanted to gamble, they had access to the horse races or other gentlemen’s games that were more acceptable to the French and therefore not considered criminal.

Referring to his field work in the early 1960’s, anthropologist and Cambodia scholar William Willmott makes the point that “ the crucial factor in inhibiting the elaboration of an associational structure for the [Chinese] community in Phnom-Penh was the presence of a system of indirect rule that was more or less unique to French Indochina...The removal of that system allowed an associational structure to develop that is consistent with that of overseas Chinese communities elsewhere.”⁵⁷⁹ If one applies this particular observation to the historical situation of Indochina’s overseas Chinese in general, it lends further credence to the notion that cercles, in the earlier years of French colonial rule, represented a legitimate attempt, how ever unsuccessful, to replicate more natural segmentations within urban Chinese communities. In that context, the very existence of these organizations suggests active, if clandestine, resistance to French authority and law.

⁵⁷⁹ W. E. Willmott, *The Political Structure of the Chinese Community in Cambodia*, (London: University of London, Athlone Press, 1970), 160.

CONCLUSION

In Indochina, the overseas Chinese narrative is a story of ascendancy set upon a backdrop of decline. In the twilight of empire, while China herself descended into chaos and disorder, overseas Chinese consolidated their economic and political power on the periphery, offering succor during disaster to their brothers in need and involving themselves, for the very first time, in national Chinese politics by contributing their material and moral support to efforts to rejuvenate the country by ending the Qing hegemony. Later, as Republican China rose from the ashes of empire only to be broken yet again by foreign invasion and civil war, overseas Chinese suppressed the competition that had characterized their intercommunity relationships for scores of years in order to support a cause that threatened them all, the territorial integrity and sovereign rights of the Chinese nation. In this way, when China herself had been brought to her knees, Chinese overseas not only became the vanguard of an international effort to mobilize for the defense and relief of her citizens, but they also became her public spokespeople, agitating and propagandizing for her support on an international stage. Because of this, it can be argued that while the power and splendor of China declined, the overseas Chinese in Indochina and elsewhere ascended, in economic power, in political influence, and in cultural significance.

In the “Introduction” to their study of local Chinese elites, Joseph Esherick and Mary Rankin comment that they include merchants among the local elites discussed in their book “because of their wealth, often buttressed by resources commonly associated with the gentry, such as degrees (purchased or regular), landholding, cultural symbols, and community involvements” and because they “relied on some resources and strategies akin to those of the late imperial gentry.”⁵⁸⁰ In fact, the notion

⁵⁸⁰ Esherick and Rankin, *Chinese Local Elites*, 12-13.

of merchants as elite nicely parallels the realities of Indochina's congregations. In other words, it suggests that Indochina's overseas Chinese reverted from the China-based segmented community of elites first suggested by Keith Schoppa and assumed a pattern of dominance within local Chinese communities that was reminiscent more of China's distant past, the mythology of which implied entrenched official hegemony.

As the local Chinese gentry of the Nanyang, wealthy merchants received traditional perquisites of exalted status, but also found themselves saddled by traditionally elite obligations, including mutual aid, community education, and defense against the hegemonic colonial bureaucracy. This situation put Chinese elite in Indochina in an ironic and conflicting position. On the one hand, the dominant French colonial state reinforced the supremacy of the Chinese merchant class, in much the same ways as China's imperial state had reinforced the power of local non-mercantile elites in China. This reinforcement achieved its most concrete form in the office of congregation president; however, even this physical manifestation of state authority seems to have been undermined by local overseas Chinese, who often picked as their presidents puppet-leaders, rich enough to satisfy colonial demands but not really occupying the top rung of the congregational hierarchy.

Additionally, this idea of colonial reinforcement is in no way intended to imply the absence of competition. Wealthy Chinese merchants and the French colonial state found themselves engaged in a brutal competition for dominance over Indochina's Chinese. Local authorities – in this case, the overseas Chinese – often challenged state hegemony and control to further their pursuit not only of profit, but also of community autonomy. This constant challenge forced the state to defend itself, especially in times of political unrest or financial strain, from the attempts made by overseas Chinese leaders to increase their own strength, and that of their community, at the expense of state power and control.

In the case of Southeast Asia's overseas Chinese and their institutional autonomy, their greatest vulnerability can be found in the question of whether or not this openly migratory and sojourning community could reasonably constitute an urban community. Indochina's overseas Chinese considered themselves to be Chinese in relation to the indigenous and colonial denizens surrounding them, but they also embraced Indochinese identities – as Tonkinese, Cambodian, Cochinchinese, or Laotian – when dealing with other Chinese, even of the same native place, dwelling elsewhere in Asia. In Indochina, this locational identity is best evidenced in the concrete hierarchy distinguishing congregations, even of the same native place, from one another. The strata of power implicit in the greater authority wielded by a congregation in Cholon vis-à-vis its counterpart in the rural hinterland, or even in a larger urban center such as Phnom Penh, suggest that locational identity and particularistic identity were separate and powerful forces in the lives of Indochina's overseas Chinese.

Additionally, the economic realities of overseas Chinese life ensured that a large percentage of Chinese migrants were destined for permanent residency in Indochina. Poverty, disease, and sheer bad fortune fated most overseas Chinese for a lifetime in Indochina, ensuring the continued existence in the colonies of Chinese with a vested interest in the quality of their South Seas life. The diversity of the apparatus of congregational mutual aid further underscores the awareness that a large percentage of Indochina's overseas Chinese would remain permanently in the colony. From hospitals to systems designed to insure the repatriation of earthly remains, congregations increased the scope and number of the services they provided to resident Chinese, indicating the certainty that Indochina's overseas Chinese community was a permanent fixture of the colonial landscape.

The idea that the frequent, and frequently violent, confrontations and feuds between various factions of the overseas Chinese community, most notably between sub-ethnic place organizations, contraindicated any type of intercommunity unity or identity also deserves closer investigation. This assertion might bear some merit in the late 19th century, but by the Republican period, the political situation of the overseas Chinese had changed. During the years of China's national humiliations, such intercommunity rivalries seem largely to have been placed on the back burner. In other words, when issues of critical national importance took the stage, the ongoing family squabbles of Indochina's overseas Chinese faded into insignificance against the backdrop of national solidarity and support exhibited by the overseas Chinese at large. In fact, a number of intercommunity organizations in Cholon provided evidence of this Chinese unity. While Indochina hosted the requisite Chinese Chamber of Commerce, it had pan-Chinese schools, mutual aid associations, and political organizations as well.

Confoundingly, according to Habermas's model, a citizen gains access to the public sphere only after his stature as a "private" citizen negates his need for association with the "public" state. If association with state authorities negates one's "private-ness," then, by definition, a majority of prominent overseas Chinese were members of the "public." This is, in fact, one of the main points of disagreement expressed by Frederic Wakeman when addressing Rowe's works on Hankou.⁵⁸¹ But I believe that a more accurate point of distinction is available to us, even within Habermas's own writings, that is, the idea of the liberal public sphere. In the liberal model of the public sphere described by Habermas, public power and private autonomy stand as competing social bulwarks, but "between the two spheres, as it were, stands the domain of private persons who have come together to form a public

⁵⁸¹ Wakeman, "The Civil Society and Public Sphere Debate."

and who, as citizens of the state, mediate the state with the needs of bourgeois society, in order, as the idea goes, to thus convert political authority to ‘rational’ authority in the medium of this public sphere.”⁵⁸² Could overseas Chinese in Indochina have occupied this role as mediators between public and private, even if they were only secondarily “citizens of the state”?

Definitive answers cannot be stated on the basis of findings in this dissertation, but tentative answers can be given. The recurring issue seems to concern the degree of co-optation of Indochina’s overseas Chinese communities by different groups and in different ways. The Chinese of Indochina were particularly susceptible to co-optation, beginning with the French colonial state whose regulations governed their lives and institutions, but more significantly, Indochina’s overseas Chinese were co-opted repeatedly throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries by the Imperial and Republican Chinese states. This co-optation took many forms, including commissions in the Imperial bureaucracy, roles as mediators between China’s reformists and revolutionaries and the financial wherewithal of the larger overseas Chinese community, and as political propagandists, agitating for change and reform in their native nation, irrespective of their places of residence.

Philanthropy provides another window into the mediating role played by overseas Chinese in Indochina, but this issue is not without controversy as well. Philanthropic activities stood as a cornerstone of Chinese elite responsibility and had, seemingly, since time immemorial. This precedent of service to kith and kin, and support of the downtrodden, was so deeply ingrained in the Confucian ethic that it poses a significant problem for historians hoping to use philanthropy as a measure of shared urban community or, especially, of modernity. However, even though philanthropic pursuits were part and parcel of local elite responsibility in Ming and

⁵⁸² Habermas, “The Public Sphere,” 401-2.

early Qing period China, changing social values could easily have affected the reasons for pursuing such activities without changing the activities themselves. In other words, self/private interest and public/state interest absolutely can coincide without real contradiction. For example, all overseas Chinese, irrespective of congregational affiliation, stood to gain by having well-trained and responsive firefighting units, decent and responsible schools, access to skilled doctors in community hospitals, or even through required participation in public works, such as construction, canal maintenance, or road improvements. Likewise, mandatory financial contributions to local defense and public safety also benefited both the state and the private spheres.

As for the co-optation of local Chinese by French, in other words, “state,” officials, commission into a colonial position provided a corresponding increase in the authority and influence available to a specific Chinese community. Essentially, it strengthened private autonomy by allowing it access to the public sphere. Why? Because, generally speaking, among overseas Chinese, money and prominence were the measure of the game, the marker of the success of both the individual and the community. Access even to a few of the rights and privileges bestowed by the colonial government translated into a very real benefit to the power and influence of private autonomy, as it was represented by the overseas Chinese. The lives of some of the Chinese elite discussed in this dissertation provide ample support of this fact. Among many examples of this phenomenon, Ly Dang’s involvement in Cholon’s municipal affairs provided him with a political safety that he exploited for personal economic gain, but for the benefit of Chinese in Indochina and Imperial and Republican China as well. Likewise, Ignace Bou’s ability to use his status as congregation president to manipulate the French colonial system to the advantage of his congregation shows the benefits of collusion with the French.

Another issue that threatens the applicability of Habermas's model to the Indochinese case concerns the notion of media as the marker of public sphere: If, as Habermas asserts, "newspapers and periodicals, radio and television are the media of the public sphere,"⁵⁸³ then what does that mean for the overseas Chinese, whose every written exchange was monitored by French authorities and whose publications existed under the dark and unforgiving cloud of French censorship? In response to this idea, I would like to contrast the realities of mass organization among Cochinchina's Chinese in particular. In the face of overt French discouragement, Cholon's Chinese still managed to achieve widespread participation in boycotts of Japanese and American products, in public protests of Japan's violations of China's sovereignty, and in commemoration of Chinese milestones, such as the death of Sun Yat-sen. The degree of participation in these events suggests that Cochinchina's Chinese were able to attain some degree of community solidarity and organization, and were also able to transmit their intentions throughout the community, without full recourse to the free mass media that Habermas claims is essential to a public sphere. In this context, with intercommunity organization and collective action freely available to the overseas Chinese community, we should consider adjusting our definition of mass media to include more traditional outlets, such as public theatre, teahouses, pleasure venues, or even the physical structure of the *huiguan* themselves, buildings to which all of Indochina's overseas Chinese were tied by colonial law, but also spaces where the most secret and important functions of each native place community found safe haven.

By concentrating on the points where Chinese, Vietnamese, and French interests intersected, I hope to have shown how they each cooperated and came into conflict with one another. Even while the French held official authority in the colonies of Indochina, Chinese transnational networks exercised unofficial control

⁵⁸³ Habermas, "The Public Sphere," 398.

over decision-making, not only in commerce but also in the wider arenas of politics, law, and society as they pertained to local Chinese communities. Implicit in this conclusion is the ability of the overseas Chinese in Indochina to manipulate the French system to their own advantage in the colonies. Likewise, Indochina's Chinese were able to use the French for assistance and protection from problems in China when necessary, and to use the government in France to affect matters on the ground in Indochina. All of these factors represent the internationalization of Indochina's Chinese, a phenomenon that allowed the Chinese to be successful in the colonial milieu while still maintaining their influence in their native territories.



Figure 22 Chinese Huiguan, Cholon⁵⁸⁴

⁵⁸⁴ Taken by the author, 2002.

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