

MASSIMO GALLUPPI

**The Chinese in French Cochinchina  
and the 1906 Commission: A Study on Collaboration\***

La Chine a-t-elle besoin de  
penser à la conquête?  
L'Indochine lui appartient déjà  
(E. Brieux, *Notes de voyage*, 1910)

The history of imperialism has made great headway in the last two decades. Many prejudices and not few clichés have been dispelled, while new research prospects have opened up. On the one hand, the publication of John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson's works have created "the most substantial debate among historians of imperialism since Parker T. Moon and William L. Langer wrote on the subject in the interwar years"<sup>1</sup>. On the other, the French historical school, with its studies on the movement of capital and the action of pressure groups, has contributed immensely to the analysis of both the economic features of imperialism and the political functions linked to the development of a capitalist economy<sup>2</sup>. How-

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For the labelling of the Chinese names, the *Pinyin* system has been used, but for the best-known ones, the conventional transcription has been adopted.

<sup>1</sup> William R. Louis, ed., *Imperialism: the Robinson and Gallagher Controversy* (New York, 1976), "Preface".

<sup>2</sup> For a general view, see Jean Bouvier, René Girault, eds., *L'impérialisme français d'avant 1914* (Paris, 1976); and the more recent René Girault, "Le difficile mariage de deux histoires. Economie et relations internationales dans le monde contemporain", *Relations Internationales*, 41 (Spring 1985), pp. 13-28.

ever, one of the most stimulating lines of research deriving from Gallagher and Robinson's writings – the recognition of the non-European components of European imperialism – has been only cursorily explored. The theoretical model proposed in *Africa and the Victorians* which Robinson formalized in the early '70s has indeed received scant attention, mainly because its basic assumption, that the central mechanism of imperialism "may be found in the system of collaboration set up in pre-industrial societies"<sup>3</sup>, called for a deep re-examination of many a historian's line of research.

In this essay Robinson's model has been the starting point for the analysis of one largely ignored episode of the history of French Cochinchina and for the reconstruction of some significant aspects of its economic, political and social life from a fresh perspective. Yet unlike Robinson, who put the local elites and the white colonists at the center of all systems of collaboration, the intention here is to focus on another category of collaborators, on the *Huaqiao*<sup>4</sup>, the Chinese immigrants from the thickly populated southern provinces of the Heavenly Kingdom who, in Cochinchina as elsewhere in Southeast Asia, gathered in communities which became perfectly integrated into the colonial economy. Social figures deserving, therefore, the greatest attention and yet, as R. Clammer has recently underlined, disregarded by modern historians of French colonial imperialism<sup>5</sup>.

In Cochinchina, the Confucian tradition and the feeling of dynastic loyalty strongly rooted in the ruling classes made the functioning of a collaboration mechanism particularly difficult. At the beginning of the conquest, a class of Vietnamese entrepreneurs and merchants as such did not exist, while the traditional bureaucratic and landowning oligarchies – even if they were willing to collaborate – could not take on functions they had never carried out and knew nothing about. This situation posed serious problems, but not insoluble ones. The white colonist, "the ideal prefabricated collaborator", had tackled similar difficulties elsewhere. The English conquerors, for instance, had been equal to their task even in the most inhospitable regions of Southeast Asia, making up for the disfunctions in the mechanisms of economic collaboration with their "coloni-

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<sup>3</sup> Ronald E. Robinson, "Non-European Foundations of European Imperialism: Sketch for a Theory of Collaboration", in W. R. Louis, ed., *Imperialism*, p. 131.

<sup>4</sup> The term *Huaqiao* is made up of two characters. The first one *Hua* means Chinese, whereas the second one *qiao* refers to a person living away from his village of origin and, by extension, away from his homeland.

<sup>5</sup> John R. Clammer, "French Studies on the Chinese in Indochina: A Bibliographic Survey", *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, XII, 1 (March 1981).

zing aptitude"; the French, however – all the sources of the time concur on this point – were much less hardy.

Since the early 1860s and for almost two decades, the French administered their Indochinese territories through the Navy, and even later continued to maintain a powerful military apparatus, certainly larger than that of the English in their Southeast Asian colonies. This military deployment might have made them less dependent on native collaboration, as has been sustained<sup>6</sup>, but this factor ought not to be given excessive weight. How were the French able to achieve their goal of integrating the conquered territories' economy with that of the industrial metropolis if control over the economic functions could not be achieved through a military approach or by the force of arms?

The hypothesis made here is that they willingly concentrated in their hands the political and military functions, assigning those economic ones, which they were unable to assume directly, to the *Huaqiao*. Of course, the power of these almost-ideal collaborators began to be questioned at the end of the century. The French colonial circles, in fact, insistently proclaimed that forty years of French presence in Indochina had had the undesirable result of putting the economy in the hands of Chinese merchants and businessmen<sup>7</sup>. Although true in essence, this affirmation was somewhat extreme, and at any rate overlooked one essential point: the functioning of an efficacious collaboration system had been possible only through this arrangement. Had it not been set up, the history of the French conquest of Indochina would not have been what it was.

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When the French settled in Cochinchina in 1862, they found a very different reality from the one they had envisioned. Their plans of collaboration with the native élite proved to be an illusion and they were forced to assume direct responsibility for the territories they had conquered, helped by a handful of Vietnamese collaborators selected from the lower strata of society<sup>8</sup>. The formation of a new ruling class willing to accept the new

<sup>6</sup> Robinson, *Non-European Foundations*, p. 133.

<sup>7</sup> "La Chine a-t-elle besoin de penser à la conquête? L'Indochine lui appartient déjà. Nous en sommes les maîtres titulaires, les Chinois en sont les maîtres réels. Ils sont 200,000 et nous 10,000. Nous avons envoyé là-bas des soldats, ils y ont envoyé des marchands. Le rêve d'avoir une colonie où l'on va gagner une fortune dont on revient jouir dans son pays, c'est nous qui l'avons fait et c'est eux qui le réalisent. Nous administrons la colonie, eux l'exploitent!". Eugène Brieux, *Notes de voyages dans l'Inde et en Indochine* (Paris, 1910).

<sup>8</sup> Lucien de Grammont, *Onze mois de sous-préfecture en Basse-Cochinchine* (La

regime and cooperate with the conquerors was slow and laborious; it began to yield fruits only at the turn of the century. Because the traditional élite was replete with Confucian values and truly loyal to the ruling dynasty, it continued being hostile or, at best, indifferent to the new rulers. Throughout the countryside rebellion erupted frequently. Behind the peasants' apathy there was a constant threat of revolt; they were ready to insurgé whenever natural calamities or poor harvests, cracks in the French control apparatus or the presence of political agitators made the existing order unbearable and its rejection possible, according to a tradition deeply-rooted in the national consciousness.

For nearly two decades the French official circles were apparently convinced that the native élite's resistance and the social tensions in the countryside would stop once they squared the accounts with the court in Hue which was encouraging and helping the rebels who operated in the adjoining provinces. Actually the imposition of a protectorate on the Nguyen monarchy in 1884 and the conquest of Tonkin did not solve any of these problems. Nationalist feelings in Annam and Tonkin continued to spread, becoming more desperate and violent than they had been in Cochinchina twenty years earlier. Once again, by not sanctioning the conquest, the Confucian scholar-gentry compelled the victors to conduct many ferocious campaigns to impose their presence<sup>9</sup>.

At the end of the century, the launch of ambitious economic development projects coincided with the decline of armed resistance, but the ensuing social transformations had unforeseen political consequences. While the upsurge of a new ruling class of Vietnamese collaborators no longer permeated with traditional values, but with interests deeply embedded in the colonial society was favored, the fragile mechanisms which had regulated the State's intervention in the countryside and the relations between landowners and peasants were being disturbed by the modernization projects. The most evident effects of the change which was taking place – increased taxation, the decline of handicrafts, the salt and spirit monopolies, the constitution of landed estates – introduced new elements of instability and tension in the Vietnamese society, creating complex problems of political

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Roche-sur-Yon, 1863), pp. 272–320. Edouard du Hailly, "Souvenirs d'une campagne dans l'Extrême-Orient", *Revue des deux mondes*, October 15, 1866, p. 898. Leopold Pallu de la Barrière, *Histoire de l'expédition de Cochinchine* (Paris, 1864), pp. 39 ff.. Paulin Vial, *Les premières années de la Cochinchine colonie française* (Paris, 1874), vol. 1, pp. 109–189.

<sup>9</sup> These difficulties are reflected in Paul Doumer's report to the *Conseil Supérieur de l'Indochine*, dated February 4, 1902. P. Doumer, *Situation de l'Indochine* (Hanoi, 1902), pp. 1–2.

governance when collaboration with the native élite was finally becoming a reality<sup>10</sup>.

Although Cochinchina was a scarcely populated region and human settlements were very recent, especially in the South – the first agricultural colonies had been established there toward the end of the 1600s – the area had an efficacious social and productive structure dominated by the rice economy the North Vietnamese pioneers had brought with them<sup>11</sup>. The French were well aware of the importance of rice exportation for the colonial economy (traditionally shipped to other Asiatic markets, especially China), but they nonetheless planned to diversify agricultural production by introducing new crops. From the onset they had the ambitious aim of turning Saigon into a big commercial harbour able to vie with Singapore in the communications network which linked Europe Southeast Asia and China<sup>12</sup>. Their projects were thwarted, however, by their lack of “vocation to colonize”. The average Frenchman, worker or bourgeois, was not willing to settle in the distant provinces of Indochina, and when he did migrate, he was not up to his task. The entrepreneurs were reluctant to invest their capitals, the merchants were not as dynamic as their English, German or American competitors and it was difficult to find farmers willing to till the virgin lands of lower Cochinchina<sup>13</sup>.

Fortunately this want of “vocation to colonize” was only a minor obstacle to the colony’s economic development which was actually delayed only in the early phase of the conquest. The French found, in fact, *in situ*, among the Chinese of Cochinchina, the collaborators to whom they could assign the economic tasks their compatriots did not care to carry out or were unable to fulfill. In some respects, the *Huaqiao* were

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<sup>10</sup> Jean Chesneaux, *Contribution à l'histoire de la nation vietnamienne* (Paris, 1955). Joseph Buttinger, *Vietnam: A Dragon Embattled*, 2 vols. (New York, 1967). Milton E. Osborne, *The French Presence in Cochinchina and Cambodia: Rule and Response, 1859–1905* (Ithaca, 1969). David G. Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism, 1885–1925* (Berkeley, 1971). William J. Duiker, *The Rise of Nationalism in Vietnam, 1900–1941* (Ithaca, 1976).

<sup>11</sup> Le Thanh Khoi, *Storia del Viet-Nam* (Torino, 1979), *passim*.

<sup>12</sup> M. H. Abel (Louis Rieunier’s pen name), *Solution pratique de la question de Cochinchine, ou fondation de la politique française dans l’Extrême-Orient* (Paris, 1864), pp. 3–24; Paul Duchesne de Bellecourt, “La colonie de Saigon: les agrandissements de la France dans le Bassin du Mékong”, *Revue des deux mondes*, March 15, 1867, pp. 427–456. G. Francis (Francis Garnier’s pen name), *La Cochinchine française en 1864* (Paris, 1864), pp. 34–37.

<sup>13</sup> Joseph d’Ariès, “La Cochinchine française: son organisation”, *Revue maritime et coloniale*, September 1871, pp. 180–181. See also, Des Varannes, “La Cochinchine française depuis l’annexion des provinces du sud”, *Revue des deux mondes*, February 1868, p. 957.

not the ideal collaborators: their interests did not coincide with those of the French in the Far East, they were unacquainted with the fundamental values of western civilization, and, obviously, they could not assume the complex political mediating functions between colonial government and natives that only the Vietnamese themselves could undertake. However, since they were not loyal to the previous regime (they did not think very highly of the bureaucrat-scholars who had ruled over them, their attitude had rather been a mixture of fear and hostility; and, according to French sources which cannot be blindly trusted, they had immediately sided with the French seen as less despotic than the Vietnamese and guaranteeing greater stability<sup>14</sup>) they were the suitable instruments for building a colonial economy which, in fact, would not have taken off without them or would have developed much later, when the metropolitan country's economic imperialism had grown more dynamic, aggressive and sturdy.

At the time of the French conquest, in the early 1860s, the Chinese in Cochinchina numbered a few thousand (perhaps 30,000) concentrated in the Bien Hoa, Dinh Tuong and Gia Dinh provinces. Cholon was a huge emporium linked to the hinterland by an extensive network of navigable canals and waterways "with vast stone piers which extended over many kilometers"<sup>15</sup>. From there, the Chinese controlled the rice trade which remained Cochinchina's main source of wealth even after the French arrival. Between 1880 and 1910 the rice fields extended<sup>16</sup>; in the forty years after 1860 the volume of trade quadrupled<sup>17</sup>; yet the trade and threshing of rice was still firmly in the hands of Cholon wholesalers and industrialists.

The shipments of rice from Cochinchina's provinces and nearby Cambodia arrived on junks either owned or hired by the Chinese wholesalers<sup>18</sup> who also had the monopoly over the jute sacks "imported from the English East Indies"<sup>19</sup>. Also, the large warehouses where the paddy was stored

<sup>14</sup> Reported in M. E. Osborne, *The French Presence*, p. 61-62.

<sup>15</sup> *Annuaire de la Cochinchine française - 1866*, p. 84.

<sup>16</sup> Nguyen Van Nghi, in his *Etude économique sur la Cochinchine française et l'infiltration chinoise* (Montpellier, 1920), pp. 33-34, gives the following figures: from 5,000 to 14,000 km<sup>2</sup>, about one-fifth of Cochinchina's area.

<sup>17</sup> From 192, 997 tons in 1866-67 - according to the 1868 *Annuaire de la Cochinchine française*, p. 207 - to the yearly average of 732,500 tons in the 1897-1906 decade, with a maximum of 992,000 tons in 1902. *Situation de l'Indochine de 1902 à 1907* (Saigon, 1908), I, p. 375.

<sup>18</sup> Yves Henry, *Economie agricole de l'Indochine* (Hanoi, 1932), p. 353. The author indicates that the junks controlled by the Chinese were 3,000 at the end of the 1920s.

<sup>19</sup> Wang Wen-yuan, *Les relations entre l'Indochine française et la Chine* (Paris, 1937), p. 39.

before being threshed, mixed, packed, and loaded belonged to the Chinese, just like the factories and shops where these operations were carried out<sup>20</sup>. With time, but very gradually, a few French firms were able to obtain control of a slice of the market; at the end of the 1920s ten of them were apparently operating successfully<sup>21</sup>. Nonetheless, the power structure on which the monopoly of the Chinese merchants was based, remained unchanged; even when a new class of Vietnamese landowners began to enrich itself in the shadow of the French colonial regime. Those landowners who tried to sell their harvest directly to the Cholon threshing factories were faced "with innumerable difficulties". The Cholon wholesalers had formed a union "with an efficient information service" and did not allow outside intrusions<sup>22</sup>. They handled all links between production centers in the interior and the ports from which the shipments bound to Europe and China departed. Therefore, even the creation of French export concerns posed no threat to them, it only gave rise to a new social role: that of the *compradore* taken on by the Chinese as well<sup>23</sup>.

The trade and processing of paddy was the Chinese's main activity, but not the only one they undertook with success. Since the early days of the Nguyen dynasty they had controlled the iron and salt mines in the Bien Hoa province and handled the commerce of everything that could be traded in Cochinchina<sup>24</sup>. After the French arrival, they continued to be engaged actively in the commerce of silk, sugar, cotton, tea, wax, and spices; they maintained a leading role in the export of products such as fish and hides; they almost totally controlled the sawing mills and sugar refineries. They monopolized the production of flowers and pepper which required skills only the Chinese work force had<sup>25</sup>. The profits from the salt trade which they had shared with the Vietnamese mandarins became exclusively theirs and this state of things lasted even after the publication of the October 20, 1899 decree which established a public monopoly on the

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<sup>20</sup> According to Henry (*Economie agricole*, p. 353), in 1929 the Chinese owned 72 husking-mills out of 75; the other three were French.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 361.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 345-353.

<sup>23</sup> Unable to establish direct contacts with the local producers, each French export company in Saigon had its own Chinese *compradore*, just like the European banks for their transactions with the Chinese community. If Georges Garros' testimony can be trusted, many *compradores* accumulated more wealth than their 'patrons'. Georges Garros, *Les usages de la Cochinchine* (Saigon, 1905), pp. 229-232.

<sup>24</sup> *Annuaire de la Cochinchine française - 1866*, p. 84.

<sup>25</sup> Charles Robequain, *The Economic Development of French Indo-China* (London, 1944), pp. 36-39.

sale of this product<sup>26</sup>. All the initiatives undertaken by the French or brought about by the development of the economy and by new colonial legislation saw the Chinese businessmen in the forefront. Alone or together with European financiers they founded banks and insurance companies. Thanks to their entrepreneurial malleability, which derived mainly from their capacity to deal with a hired-labor force (chiefly consisting of coolies from China's southern provinces), they vied with the French entrepreneurs even in public bids<sup>27</sup>, being awarded, for instance, the directorship of pawnshops and public markets put up for offers by the French administration. When in 1862 the colonial government levied an alcohol tax, the Chinese were awarded the bid, and when, in 1871, the production and sale of alcohol became a government monopoly, they were granted the right to trade in rice *acqua vitae* and other distilled spirits consumed by the Asiatic population, along with "un droit de poursuite": the right to pursue illegal distillers. Until 1880, they dominated the opium market and when, in 1881, opium import and processing fell under direct control of the colonial administration, the Chinese still kept the monopoly of the wholesale and retail trade, with a legal right equal to 10% of its retail price<sup>28</sup>. The public monopoly on opium favored the spread of parallel activities which the Chinese dominated, cashing in immense profits. But the opium trade was only the most conspicuous illegal occupation the Chinese businessmen carried out, uncontested. Cholon probably was not the corrupt and vice-laden city meticulously described by some French visitors with an ambivalent sense of righteousness<sup>29</sup>, but its chaotic urban fabric (which grew fifteenfold in 30 years) was fertile soil for the making of real estate fortunes and of profits deriving from the most diverse illegal trades (prostitution, gambling, clandestine opium dens). It was a social laboratory, unique in French Indochina, where an attentive observer could see "all the means to earn money honestly or in any other way a Chinese can discern considering the opportunities and the milieu"<sup>30</sup>.

The large fortunes and the business activities of the Chinese illustrate

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<sup>26</sup> René Dubreuil, *De la condition des Chinois et de leur rôle économique en Indochine* (Paris, 1910), p. 75.

<sup>27</sup> Dépôt des Archives d'Outre-Mer at Aix-en-Provence. Fond des Amiraux, Série F: Affaires Politiques, Dossier no. 11496. Hereafter this material will be cited as AOM (Aix) A/, followed by the Serial letter and Dossier number.

<sup>28</sup> R. Dubreuil, *De la condition des Chinois*, pp. 72-76.

<sup>29</sup> L. H. Jammes, *Souvenirs du pays d'Annam* (Paris, 1897), pp. 63-64.

<sup>30</sup> Jean-Marie A. de Lanessan, *L'Indochine française: étude politique, économique et administrative sur la Cochinchine, le Cambodge, l'Annam et le Tonkin* (Paris, 1889), pp. 447-450.



only partially how they had become integrated into the colonial society. The mercantile and financial oligarchy which controlled the business community numbered approximately 2,000 people out of a population which, in 1879 when the first census was taken, amounted to 44,000<sup>31</sup>. During the '80s the flow of immigrants was intensified; at certain times of the year, an average of 500 to 600 individuals per week was reached, and at times, peaks of 300 persons per day<sup>32</sup>. Thus, in 1904, the Chinese community numbered 125,197 people and 156,000 in 1926 despite the restrictions on foreign migration in force during the war years. Compared to the Vietnamese population (2,587,000), the *Huaqiao* amounted to only 4.84% in 1904, but they were ten times as numerous as all other Asiatic residents (Indian, Malaysian, Tagali, Japanese) whose total number reached 6,600 individuals, and 25 times as many as the French (5,165 excluding military personnel), while the other Europeans were 238.

Since the Chinese immigrants were prevalently adult males, the percentage of the active population exclusively dedicated to extradomestic activities was very high among them, 72.3% against 54.2% among the French, 53.4% among the other Asiatic immigrants and 29.8% among the Vietnamese. Furthermore, unlike the other Asiatic immigrants who concentrated around Saigon and Cholon (except for the Malaysians who had settled in the Chau Doc region), there were relatively large Chinese communities in all of Cochinchina's 23 provinces – with the exception of Poulo Condore island where the largest penitentiary of the colony was located and which was otherwise almost uninhabited. In the province of Saigon there were 17,678 Chinese out of a total Asiatic population of 51,883, equal to almost 35%. In the city of Cholon, the center of all activities and traffic, they numbered 54,699 out of a total Asiatic population of 136,875 (81,608 Vietnamese), 39.9% of the inhabitants<sup>33</sup>.

Whether he decided to live in chaotic and teeming Cholon where one out of every two inhabitants was Chinese, or whether circumstances led him to the interior of the provinces where there were only a few hundred of his compatriots (as in Go Cong, Ta Nan, or Tay Ninh), the newly immigrated Chinese could count on many forms of assistance which rendered his participation in the colony's productive framework more rapid and less traumatic. He was not isolated and did not have to make special efforts to integrate with the Vietnamese community.

Ever since a small group of followers of the last Ming emperor had

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<sup>31</sup> C. Robequain, *The Economic Development*, p. 34.

<sup>32</sup> AOM (Aix) A/F: 11506.

<sup>33</sup> *Etat de la Cochinchine française pendant l'année 1904* (Saigon, 1905), pp. 103 ff.

asked the Nguyen princes for asylum and had obtained the right to settle in lower Cochinchina, the Chinese had founded a number of confraternities in the villages. These communities were constituted on the basis of place of origin and of the dialect spoken reproducing thus, all the forms of sodality the Chinese had at home and which were essential to give meaning to their social life<sup>34</sup>. This spontaneous creation of communalities had not been thwarted by the Vietnamese authorities who had rightly seen them as harmless to the established order. "The formation of these groups answered solely the need for solidarity and mutual assistance the immigrants felt (...) since the goal of the confraternities was that of substituting on foreign soil the charitable institutions the Chinese were used to having recourse to in China". On the day of his arrival in Cochinchina, in fact, a Chinese "could apply for membership to the group of his place of origin which was responsible for housing and feeding him until he could find a job". In 1814, Gia Long officially recognized these groups calling them *Bang* and making them mandatory wherever there were more than 30 sons of the Heavenly Kingdom. In 1862, when the French conquered the three eastern provinces of Cochinchina, they recognized "the organization of the *Bangs* which came to be known by the French name of *congrégations*". The French had some doubts regarding mandatory affiliation which had been imposed by the 1814 royal ordinance. Initially, because they thought this measure would reduce Chinese immigration to Cochinchina, they decreed that "the newly arrived Chinese was free to choose whether to belong to the congregations or not". But, subsequently with the October 5, 1871 decree they went back to the practice of mandatory affiliation<sup>35</sup>.

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Certainly very different from the typical French merchant, described with a tinge of malignity and exaggeration by J. Thomson in *Straits of Malacca* – conducting "his trade with a degree of polite ease and light but elegant deliberation"<sup>36</sup> – the Chinese who belonged to the middle and lower strata of the community carried on a frenzied activity leaving little or no space to their Asiatic and European competitors. Intelligent, active "living on hardly anything, housed, dressed and fed meagerly, endowed with unremitting patience", mischievous and good-natured, cheer-

<sup>34</sup> Paul d'Enjoy, "Associations, Congrégations et Sociétés secrètes chinoises", *Société de Géographie de l'Est – Bulletin trimestriel*, n.s., XXVI (Winter 1905), pp. 201–209.

<sup>35</sup> Nguyen Quoc Dinh, *Les Congrégations chinoises en Indochine française* (Paris, 1941), pp. 24–25, 27, 45, 56–57.

<sup>36</sup> J. Thomson, *The Straits of Malacca, Indochina and China* (London, 1875), pp. 165–166.

ful and communicative, convincing and seducing thanks to "their good humor and low-priced goods" (this is how Jean de Lanessan describes them in his *Indochine française*) selling everything wherever there was a slim chance of making money and dedicating themselves to whatever they could think of, they monopolized the bulk of the retail trade in Cochinchina and applied themselves with success to an enormous number of handicrafts and industrial activities<sup>37</sup>.

Excluded from the liberal professions (law, dentistry, medicine, notary, veterinary) and from a few spheres of activities strictly linked to the material culture, life style, fashion or tradition of the Europeans (hairdresser, typographer, bookseller, millinerer, wineseller, midwife) the Chinese were present in large numbers in all the others. Out of 613 self-employed professionals, artisans, and traders listed for the city of Saigon in 1886, no less than 439 were Chinese, against 164 Europeans and 10 Indians<sup>38</sup>. An official document written by the governor general's office in 1908 provides detailed information on the artisan and small industrial activities which the *Huaqiao* carried out. The Cantonese (the most numerous congregation counting 40,000 people) dealt in fabric, silk and furniture; they were tailors, cobblers (for the European clientele), watch makers, butchers, carpenters; they owned restaurants, laundries, sawmills, small construction firms, shipyards specialized in the construction of junks, small brick and earthenware shops. All the grocery shops on the Rue Catinat, the most elegant street in Saigon, belonged to the members of the Fujian congregation who also handled the commerce of bottles, barrels, and scrap-iron. The members of the Hakas congregation were specialized blacksmiths, stone cutters, mechanics, shoemakers (for the Chinese customers), bakers, and cartmakers. They owned most of the tea and vegetable shops along the road linking Cholon to Saigon<sup>39</sup>.

Upon landing in Cochinchina most of the immigrants had no means of support. In the hope (which never materialized for most) of accumulating enough capital to start an independent activity: peddling, opening a shop or a small business, which was the first step toward climbing the social ladder and obtaining access to the business community, they had no option but that of becoming hired workers<sup>40</sup>. What was common to all the immigrants was their lack of interest for agricultural work and their predilection for an occupation within their own community where

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<sup>37</sup> J.-M. A. de Lanessan, *L'Indochine française*, pp. 32-35.

<sup>38</sup> *Annuaire de la Cochinchine française - 1886*, p. 86.

<sup>39</sup> Bréchet, *Situation des Chinois en Indochine*. Reported in Jean-André Lafargue, *L'immigration chinoise en Indochine* (Bordeaux, 1909), pp. 279-284.

<sup>40</sup> R. Dubreuil, *De la condition des chinois*, p. 17.

the relationships with the employer were regulated by tradition and the work environment was reassuring<sup>41</sup>. Yet, the *Huaqiao* were for a long time the only labor force available to the French entrepreneurs, to the owners of agricultural concerns of the interior, and to the colonial administration for the construction of public work projects.

With the passing of time, the increasing demographic pressure and the crisis of the traditional methods of production in the countryside favored the growth of a surplus of lowpaid Vietnamese workforce which made the task of the French recruiting agents easier. This, however, was not yet true at the beginning of the century, when the Chinese coolies, despite their undisciplined behavior, were very much in demand; there were never enough of them. The Saigon Chamber of Commerce went so far as to set up a commission to study the best means of recruiting them. And in 1906, when the Company for the Exploitation and Development of the Untilled Lands of the West was founded in Saigon, it faced the same problem<sup>42</sup>. Owing to the insufficiency of the labor force, socially dangerous individuals like the political exiles from the Hunan "reformist" circles were employed, despite the disciplinary problems their presence in the firms or yards posed. According to the engineers of the Public Works administration engaged in the construction of the Saigon-Khan Hoa railway line in 1908, these workers put a heavy burden on them, since, because of their bad disposition, they required stricter surveillance. The private entrepreneurs were much less punctilious. Clearly because of the labor shortage, the *Société des Dragages de Cochinchine* asked that about fifty political refugees be allowed to work for them, and a few other companies followed suit<sup>43</sup>. By the end of 1909, the 150 "reformist" Chinese hired by the Public Works administration the previous year had been employed by private concerns pleased to have them in spite of their political views<sup>44</sup>.

The presence of a numerous, dynamic and united Chinese community irritated the French colonists whose protests, however, were not loud

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<sup>41</sup> With the exception of the Hainan immigrants who numbered no more than 5,000 at the beginning of the century, and were employed in the highly-specialized pepper cultivation in the provinces of the interior. J-A. Lafargue, *L'immigration chinoise*, pp. 281-284.

<sup>42</sup> Langlois des Essart, *Etude sur la main d'oeuvre en Indochine* (Paris, 1907), pp. 73-75.

<sup>43</sup> Dépôt des Archives d'Outre-Mer at Aix-en-Provence. Fond du Gouvernement Général, Série F: Affaires Politiques, Dossier no. 20333; reports by the chief engineer for the southern district, Sept. 11 and 18, 1908. Hereafter this material will be cited as AOM (Aix) GG/ followed by the Serial letter and Dossier number.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, report by French resident at Phan-thiet, Sept. 12, 1909.

enough to press the local and metropolitan authorities to take action. The reasons for this are obvious. For many years, in the aftermaths of the conquest, the colonial economy's infrastructure which was being built rested on the shoulders of the Chinese who had become irreplaceable. The Chinese businessmen, merchants, entrepreneurs, and artisans had filled the spots the French had left vacant because of lack of capital or want of initiative, making the most of the experience acquired in the pre-colonial era. In the early years of the colonial period, the American, English, and German merchants feared their competition much more than the French did. These latter had large and comfortable houses in Saigon<sup>45</sup>, even if the bulk of the commercial activities controlled by the Europeans were not in their hands. Both the subjective accounts and the objective data available conform on this point. In 1873, ten years after the conquest, the French businessmen in Saigon were still uncertain as to their prospects in the colony and, judging from a report read at the Saigon Chamber of Commerce by its president Edmond Dierx, "fairly depressed". Trade was slow, industries were stagnant, foreign competition could not be rivaled, many manufacturers were on the brink of bankruptcy, the idea of asking the Government for protection and money was widespread, and the fact that the French had been excluded from the rice trade, which was Cochinchina's principal source of wealth, could not be explained. The English newspapers in Hong Kong commenting on Dierx's speech noted that, instead of crying poverty and draining money from the community, the French businessmen should do what their American, English, and German competitors who wanted to share in the immense profits from the rice trade in the Far East had been doing for so long: establish closer relations with Chinese intermediaries and businessmen<sup>46</sup>. The English observers in Hong Kong were rather ill-disposed toward the French in Saigon, but their observation captured the crucial point in the relations between the French authorities and the Chinese community.

Given the structure of Vietnamese agriculture in Cochinchina, based on small landholdings and on the division of latifundia into small plots of land cultivated by tenant farmers (*ta-dien*), the rice export trade required a capillary network of collection and distribution. The rich Cholon merchants who loaded, on enormous junks, the thousands of tons of rice or paddy which were exported to China or Europe every year had to have an intermediary in the interior provinces. This latter then, be he directly

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<sup>45</sup> J. Thomson, *Straits*, p. 165.

<sup>46</sup> Archives du Ministère des Relations Extérieures. Correspondance consulaire et commerciale: Hong Kong 1870-1877 (2), the French consul (Sienkiewicz) to Foreign Minister, Albert de Broglie, Oct. 31, 1873.

employed by them (*ramasseur*) or an independent wholesaler had to be highly dependable; he, on his part, had to be able to count on a number of small traders and trustees who ranged the farming areas on his behalf, keeping contact with the farmer-agriculturists, buying the harvest at the right moment, making money advances when necessary, stocking the paddy before taking it to the Chinese-run husking-mills or to the general stores where it laid until it was time to ship it to the overseas market<sup>47</sup>. The French could not tend to all this because a class of Vietnamese merchants did not exist. With the exception of a few Indian *cheeties*, the Chinese were therefore absolute masters. They were best suited to deal with the Vietnamese farmers and were the only ethnic group evenly distributed in all 23 provinces. Their relations with these latter were tense at times, but thanks to their partially common culture (the Chinese understood the Vietnamese mentality and adapted themselves to it, they spoke their language, wedded their women – who were often extremely efficient business helpers –, they accommodated themselves to the material conditions, an impossible feat for a European) they “never experience[d] that feeling of misunderstanding and basic incompatibility which so often overwhelm[ed] the European in dealing with native behavior and reactions”<sup>48</sup>. But the main reason for their supremacy was that they dominated the credit system in the countryside, which means that the peasants were passive instruments in their hands.

The French were well-aware of the perniciousness of usury, but they were totally inefficient in combatting this plague of the Vietnamese countryside. The attempt they made, starting in 1876, to set up a modern system of agricultural credit were – as Y. Henry recognized back in 1932 – unsuitable to the needs of the farmers, and the results were disappointing<sup>49</sup>. The Indian *chettie* also thrived on money-lending and so did the big and small Vietnamese landowners who invested part of their incomes in that lucrative activity. What insured Chinese primacy even in that field, however, was their ability to combine their credit activity with the paddy trade and create a single and perfectly integrated system which, within certain limits, kept the social structure of the countryside stable, guaranteeing the farmers the ownership of the land. Because, unlike their competitors who lent money against drafts, the Chinese preferred to consider the money a form of loan on future harvests, obviously “valued at unfavorable prices since it was paid in advance”. Well-informed and perfectly organized,

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<sup>47</sup> Victor Purcell, *The Chinese in Southeast Asia* (London, 1951), pp. 238–240.

<sup>48</sup> C. Robequain, *The Economic Development*, p. 38.

<sup>49</sup> Y. Henry, *Economie agricole*, pp. 660–661.

they were "on the rice fields as soon as the grains [were] ripe, and about to be harvested". The paddy was "measured, counted, delivered, picked up, loaded on the sampans or junks opportunely brought there to free the farmer from all concerns". If the harvest was poor, the loan was renewed year after year as long as it was necessary. The Chinese usurer, unlike his Vietnamese competitor who aimed at enlarging his landed estates, "took care of never dispossessing his insolvent clients". With time, however, the peasant became "a serf working to his last breath to pay off an inextinguishable loan to the Chinese money-lender"<sup>50</sup>. Nonetheless, these terms were preferable to the loss of land, and the Chinese creditor's patience was almost considered a virtue in the voracious circuit of usury which unconditionally oppressed the lower strata of the peasant society.

For all these reasons, the Chinese were indispensable collaborators and the most sagacious Frenchmen were conscious of this. At the very beginning of the conquest, Francis Garnier in his note on Cholon written for the *Annuaire de la Cochinchine française* in 1866, sustained that in the immediate future the Chinese would be "the only possible intermediaries between European trade interests and the interior of the country"<sup>51</sup>. Later, he extended this thought suggesting that the organization of all French possessions in Indochina be founded on the following collaboration scheme: the Vietnamese should tend to the primary economic functions (agriculture), the Chinese to the secondary ones (industry and trade), and the French to all the administrative and political ones – at least until they developed a greater "inclination to colonize", an evolution which would inevitably take place<sup>52</sup>.

Not all the French merchants and entrepreneurs accepted the presence of such a dynamic and enterprising Chinese community. The representatives of the large financial and commercial interests – the banks and the export–import companies – immediately realized they would draw enormous advantage from their presence, but all the others had no reason to welcome them. It is not surprising, therefore, that – as the colonial press and official papers of the time report – the pressure on the colonial administration to devise a discriminating policy against the *Huaqiao* (limit the entry of hired workers, or exclude the Chinese from public bids) was strong<sup>53</sup>.

<sup>50</sup> Buu Loc, *L'usure chez les paysans en Annam* (Montpellier, 1941), pp. 73–122 *passim*.

<sup>51</sup> *Annuaire de la Cochinchine française – 1866*, p. 85.

<sup>52</sup> Francis Garnier, *Voyage d'exploration en Indochine* (Paris, 1885), pp. 398–421 *passim*.

<sup>53</sup> For example, see L. P.-P. Paris, "Le régime des étrangers asiatiques et la colonisation française en Indochine", *Annales coloniales*, Jan. 15 and Feb. 1, 1903, and

It is clear that the French merchants who could not afford a *compradore* did not have an easy life. The Chinese, in fact, were not only fierce competitors, but also unreliable and treacherous partners according to European standards. Entertaining business relations with them was inevitable because of their pervasive presence in the business world; but the French who did so ran serious risks. The name of the merchant with whom they signed a sale contract or the trade name of a firm, for instance, was not always certain and neither was the distinction between limited and unlimited partners clear<sup>54</sup>; moreover, their account books were not kept with the same accuracy as the European ones<sup>55</sup>. This meant there was no effective legal protection for the contracts stipulated between a Chinese merchant and a European, or for credits fallen due. When two Chinese were involved, on the other hand, a private agreement was signed between creditor and debtor for the settlement of accounts. Because of community norms, this procedure was binding for the Chinese while it was not wholeheartedly accepted by the Europeans, with the result that many a Cholon merchant, to avoid paying off a debt, closed shop and sailed for Hong Kong – returning sometimes later to start the same activity under a different name<sup>56</sup>. The resentment episodes of this kind arose, could not be ignored for long by the Colony's authorities who, in fact, after a series of bankruptcies had led to a wave of protest among the French, passed an *ad hoc* decree on February 28, 1892. On paper the 1892 decree was excellent. The norms of the French civil code were to apply to Chinese business transactions, bankruptcies, and judicial liquidation clearances; in addition, the French court was to settle all controversies in which a Frenchman was involved. This decree was never enforced, however; the threat of a boycott of French shops was enough to bring the colonists themselves to ask for its abolition, or at least its temporary suppression<sup>57</sup>. The outcome of this issue illustrates clearly the power struggle between the two communities and explains why the French, who were politically strong, were not able to convince the administration to cut the tentacles of the "pieuvre chinoise" which, they thought, was strangling the colonial economy. Determined not to compromise the economic development of Cochinchina to protect small

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P. B., "Le danger chinois en Indochine", *Quinzaine coloniale*, Jan. 25, 1913. The colonial circles were not of one mind, however. For a different viewpoint see Camille Gauthier, "L'émigration chinoise dans les pays de l'Extrême-Orient", *Bulletin de la Société de géographie commerciale de Paris*, 1893, pp. 641-648, and H. Brenier, "L'illusion jaune", *Annales de l'École des Sciences Politiques*, 1898, pp. 249-262.

<sup>54</sup> G. Garros, *Les usages*, pp. 289-292.

<sup>55</sup> R. Dubreuil, *De la condition des Chinois*, p.81.

<sup>56</sup> G. Garros, *Les usages*, pp. 345-348.

<sup>57</sup> R. Dubreuil, *De la condition des Chinois*, p. 111.



vested interests, the colonial administration did not pass any of the measures the colonists tried to impose.

The idea that Chinese trade was and would remain “preponderant for a long time, and that the Chinese were the essential intermediary between producers and importers who operated in Cochinchina was deeply seated in the mind of the French authorities. They indeed warned their compatriots against the danger of modifying such a well-tested collaboration mechanism which had been so successful in the past. And fortunately, despite the fierce competition the Chinese represented for the European traders, the government in Saigon did not take the discriminatory and intimidating measures public opinion periodically demanded. If it had had the strength to take them, it would have embarked – as Jean de Lanessan wrote in about 1880 – on an extremely dangerous course at the end of which there would have been nothing but “the fall of the colony” and the decline of French interests in the Far East<sup>58</sup>.

The authorities did not substantially modify their point of view later on. In 1901 the private citizens’ and the House of Commerce’s attempts to exclude the Chinese from public biddings failed. The colonial administration drafted a news letter in the typically cautious bureaucratic language, which contained many of the arguments Lanessan had put forth ten years earlier. In a note written on March 27, 1905, Governor General Paul Beau was very explicit: the exclusion of the Chinese from public biddings would be inefficacious and counterproductive. Inefficacious because the Chinese, with the help of French men of straw, would keep their grip on the bid market, and counterproductive because the only result would be a rise in prices with a resulting burden on the colony’s Treasury. Seventy years after the conquest, the economic apparatus controlled by the French was still precarious and unsuited to a modern and constantly evolving colonial society. There was no doubt, Beau concluded, that under these circumstances, Chinese participation in the Colonial economy’s infrastructures was still “indispensable”<sup>59</sup>.

Actually, until the first World War, the relations between French, Chinese and Vietnamese were very similar to those Garnier had conceived of in 1866. But the juridical institutions the French had set up in Cochinchina were not guided by the respect and sense of *noblesse oblige* the impe-

<sup>58</sup> J.-M. A. de Lanessan, *L’Indochine française*, p. 453. See also Governor General Filippini to Minister of Colonies, Mar. 2, 1887. AOM (Aix) A/L (Commerce, Industrie, Tourisme): 13803.

<sup>59</sup> Quoted in Chieu Nguyen Huy, *Le statut des Chinois en Indochine* (Paris, 1939), pp. 75–77. See also Governor General Luce to Minister of Colonies, June 8, 1911. AOM (Aix) GG/F: 50950.

rialist-intellectuals of the first generation (Aubaret, Garnier, Luro, Philastre and others still) had shown toward the Heavenly Kingdom and her sons<sup>60</sup>. The highest French colonial officers were practical men, animated solely by political motives. The institutions they created or were called to make work were neither merciful nor tolerant toward Cochinchina's non-European peoples, and the Chinese, like the others, had to grow accustomed to the suspicious, arrogant, punctilious, and oppressive presence of the many metropolitan officials whose social status and whose very *raison d'être* depended upon their making the complex administrative mechanisms function.

The bureaucratic and authoritative tendencies of the colonial government derived from a specifically French administrative tradition, but it must not be forgotten that the complex internal makeup of the Chinese community and its extraordinary dynamism raised particularly thorny issues. The fact that Chinese migration was a spontaneous phenomenon created many difficulties for the French. Due to the high demographic pressure in the southern provinces of China, migration was often clandestine and a cause of social discontent which the authorities had difficulty in controlling; an experience the Vietnamese governments had undergone before the French – as can be evinced from Minh Mang's 1829 edict:

In the past, when the junks of the Tsing [name given to the Chinese since the Qing era] used to enter our government's citadel to trade, they were always full of passengers. The most crowded ones had 500 to 600 people on board. The least crowded ones no less than 300 or 400. When it was time for them to leave, the General Staff and the crew numbered about 60 to 80 people only; all the others stayed behind to look for relatives, they said. They settled every where, in towns, villages and hamlets. Some traded, others cultivated the land to earn a living. In a year, the number of these immigrants amounted to 3,000–4,000 people. But they all arrived empty-handed, always on the look out for a chance to make money. Being fertile, the territories under the citadel's control are some of the most suitable places to earn a living easily. Commerce is highly profitable, so the number of inhabitants grows every day and the price of rice increases constantly. These newcomers, finding life easy in these fertile areas, having plenty of food and clothing, become rapidly idle and follow their worst instincts. They meet to play or buy and sell opium, they corrupt the weakest ones who become violent and turn into thieves or even murderers. Several crimes have been committed and grave problems ensued. All these things are caused by these immigrants who are like the dodder destroying the soil which nourishes the clover on which it depends<sup>61</sup>.

<sup>60</sup> For additional information, see Massimo Galluppi, *Intelletuali e agenti dell'imperialismo in Estremo Oriente: Francis Garnier e la conquista francese dell'Indocina, 1860–1873* (Napoli, 1984), pp. 79–98 *passim*.

<sup>61</sup> The text is in M. Verdeille, "Edits de Minh Mang concernant les Chinois de Cochinchine", *Bulletin de la Société des études indochinoises*, 4, 1933, pp. 13–14.

In order to combat this plague, the Vietnamese authorities ordered the census of all immigrants upon entry. Ledgers with their names and finger prints (*diem-chi*)<sup>62</sup> were to be kept, establishing thus the principle that their entry was subordinated not only to their acceptance by the congregations but also to their registration at the tax bureau. These measures soon proved insufficient, however; illegal immigration grew and even those who were duly registered did so under an assumed name in order to escape subsequent controls. In an 1832 edict, Minh Mang ordered that tighter control measures be applied. Upon their entry in the Vietnamese ports, the junks coming from China – which had to anchor at a berth assigned them and remain there until their departure – underwent an accurate inspection whose outcome was the writing up of separate lists for the crews, the merchants, and the other passengers, an inventory of the goods, and control of the logbooks. These documents were then transmitted to the tax official responsible for the junks who, after controlling them, registered the names of the passengers disembarking, called the relative heads of the congregations and villages who, together with the captain, formally identified the newcomers before their landing. Before sailing off, the captain was to make a new list of the passengers aboard. A copy of both the entry and exit ledgers, written by an official assigned to the job, was taken to the port officials who examined the names, the *diem-chi*, and authorized the departure only of those people whose names appeared on both ledgers. The controls still did not stop there. The heads of the congregations and those of the villages, were to keep a record of the immigrants, bring it up-to-date regularly, probate cases of death and transfers to other villages. Harsh punishments were provided for those who did not report illegal residents and for unscrupulous imperial officials<sup>63</sup>.

From an analysis of these norms, it can be evinced that the basic principles of the control system the French enacted subsequently were already in force at the time of the conquest. At first the colonial authorities acted gingerly; between 1862 and 1871 they adapted the existing laws, which they barely knew, to their juridical tradition<sup>64</sup>. But the fragmen-

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<sup>62</sup> The *diem-chi* was a particular form of signature designed for the illiterate. It consisted in fingerprinting the first two phalanges of the left hand index.

<sup>63</sup> The text is in Verdeille, "Edits de Minh Mang", pp. 16-22.

<sup>64</sup> The above-mentioned Minh Mang edicts were discovered, translated and published by Verdeille only in 1932; the Vietnamese Code (the so-called Gia Long Code) to whose translation and commentary Paul Philastre worked for many years had a few insignificant norms regarding Chinese immigration (Paul Philastre, *Le Code annamite*, 2 vols., Paris, 1876). The same is true of Trinh Hoai Duc's, *Gia-Dinh thong chi* translated by Gabriel Aubaret (G. Aubaret, *Histoire et description de la Basse Cochinchine*, Paris, 1863).

tariness and contradictions of many of the norms passed in that period led the administration to draw up an organic text which crystallized in the October 5, 1871 decree.

According to the decree, the Chinese migrants in Cochinchina were divided into three categories on the basis of their social status. The first category included the notables, all the traders and entrepreneurs who had a first or second class business license, and the land owners who paid a property-tax of at least 300 Francs a year. The second category was composed of those with lower class licenses and the land owners who paid less than 300 Francs in taxes. The third one grouped all the others<sup>65</sup>. On the basis of this classification, a selective control system was set up. The notables were watched limitedly; their only obligation was to carry a "carte-passe-port" which had to be validated yearly. Stricter and more complex laws regulated those who belonged to the second category; the 10th article of the 1871 decree established that they, like those registered in the third category, had to have a "livret-carte", yet, article 14 excluded from this obligation those who could prove, on the basis of their activity, to have a fixed home<sup>66</sup>.

It is clear that the 1871 decree was drawn up with a view to controlling, above all, those immigrants who would be at the lowest rungs of the social ladder (peddlers, for instance, or wage earners: workmen, farm-laborers, servants and so on). To the government, all these people (actors as well) were potential "vagrants or troublemakers" and were not to be trusted. Consequently they came under strict surveillance. Their work permit had to contain not only their personal data and special peculiarities, but include a photograph and (for the wage-earning workers) information regarding their work-contract or (for those who were daily-laborers or paid by the job) the name and address of their employer. The wage-earners were strictly forbidden to live anywhere but at the address indicated on their work-permit. Whoever moved or left the work place to which he was linked by contract was considered a "deserter". His employer had to report his "escape within three days" and he was searched for like a common criminal; a 10 Franc price was even set on his head. He could be imprisoned and kept behind bars until he was able to reimburse the amount paid in advance by his employer plus a sum equal to the cost of his trip back home. In case of "general desertion" the troops could be called in<sup>67</sup>.

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<sup>65</sup> *Bulletin Officiel de la Cochinchine*, 1871, p. 322.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 323-324.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 324-329.

The lack of discipline of the wage-earning workers and the mobility of the artisans and peddlers and all those who had no fixed occupation were the real issues the 1871 decree aimed at confronting. Yet, the privileges of the notables and of the middle and upper strata of the business community did not last very long. With the November 24, 1874 decree, what had been a set of restrictive norms inspired to rigorous class criteria became a system of control which concerned an entire ethnic group, all the Chinese in Cochinchina. In a *Note sur la réglementation de l'immigration chinoise en Indochine* written about 30 years later (when the system introduced in 1874 had started to give in) an anonymous official explained that the spirit of the decree had been to suppress the employment-cards which "had allowed vagrants to evade the colonial authorities' control by changing their residence every year and passing for newcomers"<sup>68</sup>. This explanation is, however, only partly convincing. Since the 1871 decree had neither instituted a central office for the collecting and keeping of immigration data nor created specific organs to keep contacts with the single districts (*inspections*), the coolies who were free, those whose work contracts had expired, or the poorest traders had been able to escape the prescribed controls. To fill in these gaps in the system, the 1874 decree created an Immigration Bureau with its seat in Saigon, introduced even more rigid controls and, more important still, modified the political spirit of the previous decree.

It is not easy to say why the French passed this new legislation. Perhaps it was a deliberate act of hostility against the powerful financial oligarchy which controlled the Chinese community or, more simply, due to French juridical formalism. Whereas the 1871 decree had been conceived to punish the social insubordination of the rejects, the 1874 ordinance abolished all class distinctions. Article 2, in fact, ordered "all Asiatic immigrants without exceptions" to submit to exactly the same control procedures (which were longer and more complicated for those who arrived directly in Saigon), in order to obtain a provisional entrance permit which would make their stay in the colony legal, but would have to be substituted later by a sojourn permit renewable each year. From that date onwards, all the Chinese in Cochinchina had to reckon with French bureaucracy and with its numerous and punctilious regulations.

An extremely complex system of authorizations and permits was devised to restrict the movement of persons within the colony, and to insure that changes of residence, or the mere movements from one province or district to the other, would not escape police or immigration notice. Heavy

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<sup>68</sup> The text of the document is in AOM (Aix) GG/F: 39828.

finances and jail terms were set for those who violated these regulations, especially for the habitual law-breakers, and those who had lost or could not show their travel-pass or sojourn permit<sup>69</sup>. Article 34 of the February 19, 1890 decree prescribed that whoever did not have his residence papers or travel passes in order, could be taken to the chief town of the province and "imprisoned until his position was cleared"<sup>70</sup>. With the February 3, 1886 decree, the distinction on the basis of social status was re-introduced for the travel passes, but since the controls were particularly vexing for the businessmen and merchants, the taxpayers in the two highest tax brackets were exempted<sup>71</sup>. This, however, was an isolated measure which was not pursued in other areas. No class criterion was included in the October 8, 1897 decree which, however, instituted a Bureau of Anthropometric Identification which all Chinese, especially those who were well-off, found extremely humiliating<sup>72</sup>. No class distinction either in article 8 of the February 27, 1899 decree which was in some respects the most restrictive one of the entire code regulating Asiatic immigration. It considerably extended the power of the Immigration officials who from 5:30 a.m. to 6:30 p.m. could search the houses of the Chinese suspected of violating the immigration laws or of lodging someone accused of such violation, without a warrant<sup>73</sup>.

Security was of vital importance for an authoritarian non-native regime, but surveillance was not practiced with the sole aim of preserving public order. As the author of the *Note sur la réglementation de l'immigration chinoise en Indochine* prudently suggests, the French authorities considered it legitimate to "make the foreign Asians pay their share of the colony's expenses"<sup>74</sup>. The French had made enormous investments to foster the development of a modern economy in Cochinchina and the Chinese, more than anyone else, had taken advantage of this. It was therefore rightful that they gave back part of the wealth they had accumulated. The French colonists paid taxes reluctantly; the Vietnamese farmers could not be squeezed beyond limit – for political reasons, a certain degree of prudence was deemed necessary; the Chinese, on the other hand, were foreigners, they could claim no national rights, their stay in Cochinchina

<sup>69</sup> The text of the decree appeared in *Courrier de Saigon* of Nov. 25, 1874.

<sup>70</sup> *Recueil général permanent des actes relatifs à l'organisation et à la réglementation de l'Indochine*, I (1776-1902), 1904, p. 224.

<sup>71</sup> AOM (Aix) GG/F: 39828, *Note sur la réglementation de l'immigration chinoise en Cochinchine*, p. 8.

<sup>72</sup> *Recueil permanent*, I, p. 448.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 541.

<sup>74</sup> *Note sur la réglementation*, p. 1.

had always been subject to the whims of the governors who, depending on the circumstances, were well-disposed or hostile. Chinese influx in Cochinchina could be thwarted and the Chinese expelled at any time without any problems of a moral or juridical nature (albeit with some practical difficulties). From a certain viewpoint, they were the ideal taxpayers; and the French Revenue could be particularly exacting in their regard. And that is exactly what happened. In addition to the "normal" tax burden (which included indirect taxation on landed estates and businesses) a high poll tax (*impôt de capitation*), much higher than, and just as hated as the one which oppressed the Vietnamese was introduced.

The first ordinance of this type was enacted on August 11, 1862. A yearly fee of one piastre was fixed for the sojourn permit. Other measures followed in a sporadic manner until the October 5, 1871 decree which, together with reorganizing the legislation in force, aggravated the tax burden. All the members of the Chinese community were divided into three categories on the basis of their tax-paying ability; the poll tax was set at 300 Francs for the first and second class license-holders and for the land-owners subject to a property-tax of at least 300 Francs; at 100 Francs for the other merchants and for those who paid a property-tax inferior to 300 Francs; at 25 Francs for all the others (coolies, workmen and hired servants). For the new arrivals belonging to the first two categories, payment was due upon entry in the colony. The others started payment after a year; they had to meet their tax obligations in the first three months of their second year in the colony. In case of default, the charge was doubled. If insolvent, the taxpayer could be jailed for a year and then expelled <sup>75</sup>.

The October 5 decree was followed by several other ordinances (not particularly coherent ones), a fact which proves the French colonial administration's indecision before two contradictory exigencies: lighten the tax burden of the unprosperous in order to favour the immigration of Chinese hired-labor and, on the other hand, fight vagrancy and prevent a reduction of the taxable income which would make the colony's accounts deficitary. Exemption from the poll tax granted to the less prosperous Chinese in their first year in the colony was abolished on February 28, 1875; re-established on December 31 of the same year, and suppressed definitively on April 6, 1876. The agricultural workers, on their part, were exempted from paying for the sojourn card for a period of four years, but subsequently a 10 Franc poll tax was imposed on them (June 2, 1874 decree and June 13, 1874 circular); whereas the Chinese included in the

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<sup>75</sup> *Bulletin Officiel de la Cochinchine*, 1871, pp. 322, 329-330.

third category were first burdened with a 25 Franc tax paid out upon leaving the colony (December 31, 1873 decree) which was later rescinded (January 13, 1875)<sup>76</sup>.

Article 10 of the November 24, 1874 decree which exempted women and children up to 10 years of age from paying taxes was the only addition to the taxation scheme. Its provisions were later widened and permanently, included in the legislation which regulated the life of the Chinese community in Cochinchina; in other respects, the tax scheme remained the same for over 15 years. A comprehensive system which rationalized all the regulations approved until then was established on January 25, 1885; except for the change from Franc to Piastre for the computation of taxes (5 Francs for 1 Piastre) and the slightly altered tax rates, the essence of the rulings remained the same.

The first tax increase was decreed with the February 15, 1889 ordinance which changed the mechanism on which the system of trade licenses was founded (different prices were set for licenses of the same class "depending on the importance of the locality") and also amended the rates of the poll tax. However, a new situation had developed. The ambitious development programs of the late 1890s had forced the governor of the colony to impose new and increasingly burdensome taxations on the colonial society as a whole and, obviously, the *Huaqiao* had to pay their share. With the May 21, 1897 decree (which had to increase the taxable income by 40% equal to 411,000 Piastres plus value) the Chinese were redistributed into six categories in order to collect the poll tax now called '*droit d'immatriculation*' or '*impôt personnel*'. One category was defined as 'out-standing'; it included all the merchants, the land and property owners who paid a license of 400 Piastres or a corresponding property tax. For them a registration fee of 400 Piastres was set. For the other five categories, taxes were lowered from 200 to 10 piastres. Holders of a business license of less than 4 piastres, owners of small businesses, manual workers, farm laborers and dependent workers in general paid the lowest rate<sup>77</sup>. For the poorer segments of the population it was a heavy blow. The poll tax was raised to 60-180% for the middle strata (who paid 30 piastres in 1890 and had to pay 50 to 100 in 1897); for the lowest ones the raise was 30-180% (going from 7 piastres to a minimum of 10 and a maximum of 20 piastres); this, at a time when prices and salaries were stable.

The number of vagrants French sources on Chinese immigration in Cochinchina mention must have included more than roamers; other outcasts

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<sup>76</sup> *Note sur la réglementation*, pp. 5-6.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 7-10.



were probably assimilated to them, certainly those who evaded the heinous poll tax. For a coolie 10 piastres meant 10 to 20 days' work; so it is not surprising that he saw the poll tax as a curse and thought of the best means to avoid paying it. Preoccupied by the chronic shortage of labor force at the beginning of the century, the Saigon Chamber of Commerce asked that the fiscal pressure on the Chinese immigrants be reduced. But the colonial administration held on to the financial criteria it had always followed<sup>78</sup>.

This uncompromising defense of budgetary orthodoxy was certainly appreciated in Paris, but if tax evasion did not gather momentum and become a socially dangerous movement, it was only because of the control mechanisms which operated within the Chinese community itself, that is, thanks to the existence of the congregations. None of the numerous measures mentioned so far would have been enforced without their help and their collaboration was, in fact, sanctified in all the decrees from 1871 onwards. As far back as 1814, all the Chinese had to become members of one of the seven congregations (later reduced to five) which had been founded in Cochinchina<sup>79</sup>. This mandatory membership had been introduced by the Vietnamese, but it was the French who exploited it to the utmost. They not only made enrollment in the congregations mandatory for all those who wanted to emigrate to Cochinchina (the exemption for all the workers with a contract sanctioned by the 1871 decree was later abolished) but the congregations also had to be involved in choosing the immigrants to be allowed into the country, giving them a juridical status and a social rank with a view to classifying them for tax purposes<sup>80</sup>. In addition, the French established the principle of the fiscal responsibility of the congregations. As soon as the immigrant became member of a congregation and was classified as such by the Immigration Service, the notables in charge of the congregation accepted the responsibility for payment of all taxes and dues to the state<sup>21</sup>.

This new principle of civil responsibility modified the role the congregations had set for themselves within the Chinese community<sup>82</sup>. Created as a means of solidarity, as a form of self-government, they had evolved into a mediating force between the community and the Vietnamese and

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<sup>78</sup> Langlois des Essart, *Etude sur la main d'oeuvre*, pp. 72-73.

<sup>79</sup> Guangzhao, Chaozhou, Qiongzhou, Fujian, Hainan, Fuzhou and Kejia. In 1885 the Fuzhou congregation was absorbed by the Fujian one and that of Qiongzhou by the Hainan one. Tsai Maw-Kuey, *Les Chinois au Sud-Vietnam* (Paris, 1968), pp. 33-35.

<sup>80</sup> Nguyen Quoc Dinh, *Les Congrégations*, pp. 127-174 *passim*.

<sup>81</sup> Decree of February 19, 1890. *Recueil permanent*, I, p. 222.

<sup>82</sup> G. Garros, *Les usages*, pp. 366-367.

later French authorities; an institutional role largely foreign to their original function. They had been chartered to keep public order and to settle all civil and commercial controversies involving their members through their own arbitral courts (*Cong-So*) – a function the Saigon Court of Appeals formally recognized with their February 27, 1896 decision. Nonetheless the Congregations had retained some form of autonomy from the established authority, successfully keeping their members from excessive conduct. It is significant, from this point of view, that the responsibility of the heads of the congregations in matters of public order was considered illusory by some French observers who cited cases of Chinese indicted by the French juridical authorities who had found a haven in the Congregations<sup>83</sup>.

The principle of civil responsibility in fiscal matters gave new impetus to the Congregations' integration in the French colonial regime. The fines, and in more serious cases jailings, prescribed in cases of violation of public order norms were not enough to deter the heads of the Congregations from the traditional protective role they saw as inherent to their function. But since this civil responsibility could involve huge financial responsibility as well, they could not afford to allow the tax collecting mechanism to work badly or not work at all. The French who criticized the near-institutional role the Congregations had in Cochinchina sustained, rather superficially, that the notables took advantage of the fiscal power colonial law had granted them to enrich themselves at the expense of their compatriots, extracting from them more money than the Treasury received. This may have been true in a few isolated cases, but more probably, the Treasury's requests were such as to force the Congregations to be involved in a vicious circle which could only lead to their loss of autonomy and to their becoming mere instruments in the hands of the French colonial administration. An eventuality which would imply a total loss of identity on their part, and would provoke strong reactions and traumatic lacerations within the community. It is worth noting however, that this process was incipient and that the social insubordination prompted by the oppressive tax policy of the government found, within the Chinese community itself, the main instruments for its prevention, repression, and control.

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The May 21 and February 27 decrees were perhaps the last straw. Although all had been planned in order to obtain the congregations' col-

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<sup>83</sup> R. Dubreuil, *De la condition des Chinois*, pp. 37–39, 45.

laboration, and the consensus of the notables, whose authority was still highly respected at the turn of the century, strong dissatisfaction began to spread in the Chinese community. The years 1904, 1905 were particularly bad for the economy. The typhoon and then the drought which hit the provinces (especially those of My Tho, Go Cong and Cholon) ruined the harvests, leaving the farmers in abject poverty<sup>84</sup>. In some districts "cases of underhand resistance to the authorities' orders" began to be registered, followed by protests, shouts and insults against the government's representatives<sup>85</sup>. The effects of the poor harvest must have been felt above all by the Vietnamese population, but the *Huaqiao*, whose activities were so closely linked to the economic cycle of the countryside, (small shopkeepers and artisans who depended on the farmers' buying power, and the coolies who were directly affected by all changes in agricultural prices) must have suffered its consequences as well. In fact, the French administrators' reports from several provinces (from Bien Hoa and Soc Trang at the beginning of 1905, for instance) mention them as participating in the farmers' revolts<sup>86</sup>.

The attempts at evading the poll tax became more numerous. In 1904, 600 Chinese were expelled for tax evasion; in 1905, 1,324 and in 1906, 1,481<sup>87</sup>. Cases of clandestine expatriation (with the same aim) were so frequent that in 1904 the Governor General, Paul Beau, consulted with the Colony's Ministry on the need to take stricter measures against European and American ship captains who concealed (under payment) groups of miserable Chinese, helping them escape the Immigration Bureau's agents<sup>88</sup>. The social discontent that all these facts point to had extremely serious political effects. The secret societies which were ruthlessly fought and were outlawed by article 36 of the February 19, 1890 decree, became more active. The French authorities who had perhaps deceived themselves in this sense, had to accept the fact that the societies "had not laid down their arms" but that their influence was bound to "gain ground every day". From the Rach Gia province, came the first alarming signal: the secret societies had improved their strategy and geared their action to gaining control over all the congregations and all the public charges<sup>89</sup>.

<sup>84</sup> "Dans des nombreuses provinces la misère est grande et les habitants émigrent vers les régions qui ont été moins éprouvées". *Rapport d'ensemble sur la situation politique et économique de la Cochinchine pour les mois de janvier et février 1905*, AOM (Aix) GG/F: 166.

<sup>85</sup> *Rapport d'ensemble*, Mai-June 1904. AOM (Aix) GG/F: 165.

<sup>86</sup> *Rapport d'ensemble*, January-February 1905.

<sup>87</sup> *Situation de l'Indochine de 1902 à 1907* (Saigon, 1908), I, p. 126.

<sup>88</sup> AOM (Aix) GG/F: 39831, April 1904 draft.

<sup>89</sup> AOM (Aix) GG/F: 166, report of September 25, 1905.

The internal situation was further aggravated by the international crisis which hit Eastern Asia at the beginning of the century. The Russo-Japanese war had made an impression on the Chinese in Cochinchina and the French administrators of the Bien Hoa province had to listen with acute preoccupation to the fantastic stories spread by Chinese agitators among the population in the countryside as to an imminent entry of the victorious Japanese in Cochinchina<sup>90</sup>. The events in China had a greater and probably more enduring influence on the internal situation: there, the resumption of political activity, following the traumatic experience of the Boxer Rebellion, had caught the attention of the official and unofficial circles concerned about the fate of the Chinese community in South-East Asia. The Canton, Hong Kong, and Shanghai newspapers started to write regularly about the "unfair" control systems imposed on the Chinese upon their arrival in Cochinchina and the oppressive fiscal pressure they were subject to.

In the past, on three occasions, between 1886 and 1893, the Chinese Foreign Minister had taken diplomatic steps to obtain from the French government the abolition of the poll tax, meeting with no success however<sup>91</sup>. Then, at the beginning of the century (on December 8, 1903, May 17 and July 8, 1905) the same attempts were made. Courteous but firm was the Quai d'Orsay's refusal<sup>92</sup>; but in the French official circles, preoccupation for the protest against control over the *Huaqiao* began to grow<sup>93</sup>. In July of 1905 the French Resident at Nam Binh reported the presence of Chinese officials who had come to incite their compatriots to communicate "their complaints and remarks on European behaviour" to the Foreign Ministry in Peking<sup>94</sup>. In the first few months of 1906 the news, coming from Canton and Shanghai, of the Chinese boycott of American goods (a boycott brought about by the humiliating control measures the Chinese were subject to at American West coast ports) and the echo of the impressive manifestations of solidarity - to which "a few hundred thousand people" participated - for the death of a Shanghai student who had taken his life to protest against the American consul's scornful declarations, were received with the greatest concern by Hanoi's European residents, and subsequently by those in Saigon. Maladroitly concealing their concern, the colonists began to ask themselves "whether the European

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, report of March 25, 1905.

<sup>91</sup> J.-A. Lafargue, *L'immigration chinoise*, p. 98.

<sup>92</sup> AOM (Aix) GG/F: 7715.

<sup>93</sup> AOM (Aix) GG/F: 22444.

<sup>94</sup> AOM (Aix) GG/F: 22464, report of the French Resident at Nam Binh, July 30, 1905.

governments will not have to take, in the briefest delay, more forceful measures to bring the court in Peking to a just cognizance of its position toward foreigners", and also if the policy toward the Chinese community carried out until then should not be modified. Since the *Huaqiao* were "one of the chief agents of Cochinchina's economic activity", it was preferable to grant them some concessions immediately rather than having to face "ineluctable claims which could take on an unpleasant turn" later<sup>95</sup>.

To the Chinese xenophobic activity must be added the ferment of the Indochinese reformist and revolutionary circles struggling to topple the Qing dynasty and actively searching, among the overseas Chinese, financial and logistic support for their clandestine actions in China. The arrival of K'ang Yu-wei in Singapore, in February 1900, helped awake the political consciousness of many a notable Chinese in Cochinchina where an anti-dynastic petition promoted by the Shanghai reformist circles obtained 780 signatures, a significant number, even though negligible compared to the 32,000 collected in nearby Thailand.

Thanks to its contiguity with China's southern provinces, where the anti-dynastic movement was more intense, French Indochina was, together with Hong Kong, the perfect meeting place for the Nationalists' clandestine encounters; this, until Singapore and Malaya supplanted them. From 1903 onwards, the nationalist *credo* began to spread throughout Southeast Asia thanks to the numerous publications printed in Shanghai, Hong Kong and Tokyo, and diffused by the *Tongmenghui* section in Singapore where the publications in Chinese were not censored. It is highly probable that this propaganda also reached the Chinese communities in Indochina; what is certain, however, is that, even there, between 1907 and 1911, the reading clubs (*Shubao she*) appeared. They were not only meeting places and recruitment centers for the revolutionaries, but they also had a central role in the diffusion of nationalist ideas among the low and illiterate strata of the *Huaqiao*<sup>96</sup>.

The reformist and revolutionary movements' activity was not geared to make trouble for the French colonial regime on whose tolerance they obviously had to rely in order to move freely around the country and among their compatriots. Neither did their activity threaten the Big Powers' considerable interests in China. Even the most radical groups' programs were reassuring on this point and actually, prospected greater economic opportunities than those the imperial government offered - the March

<sup>95</sup> "Le Chinois de l'Indochine", *La quinzaine coloniale*, Feb. 10, 1906.

<sup>96</sup> Yen Ching-Hwang, *The Overseas Chinese and the 1911 Revolution* (New York, 1979), pp. 154-155, 306, 106-107, 111-115.

1901 document Sun Yat-sen sent to the French government through its embassy in Tokyo is extremely clear on this point<sup>97</sup>. For both reasons, the French *Sûreté* did not keep a keen eye on them. But it is clear that it had underestimated the potential danger they represented, as is shown by Paul Doumer's observations on Sun's plans. Doumer thought them hardly worth considering, "despite the man's sharp mind"<sup>98</sup>. It is a fact that until 1908, when a few revolutionaries were involved in some bloody attacks in Hanoi, the French authorities had not been unsympathetic toward the revolutionaries who had taken refuge in Indochina<sup>99</sup>.

Yet, nationalist propaganda was an important factor in changing the relations between the Chinese community in Cochinchina and the French colonial administration. The official documents are not exhaustive on this point; it is clear, however, that the nationalist ideology was incompatible with the state of political oppression in which the *Huaqiao* lived. In its popular version – as Yen Ching-Hwang has shown in *The Overseas Chinese and the 1911 Revolution* – this ideology, largely diffused in the Southeast Asian Chinese communities at the beginning of the century, was pervaded by a deep sense of doom for the tragic destiny of China, attacked, ravaged, humiliated, and her very existence threatened by the voracious policy of the Western Powers. In all the Chinese, including the *Huaqiao*, the nationalist ideas awoke a fierce and desperate desire for avengement for the injustices of which they were victims, and roused strong xenophobic feelings<sup>100</sup>.

But, obviously, only a minority of them was capable of subversive action. The notables and wealthy merchants defended the existing social order; they feared and despised the radical ideas which were being spread. Yet, the national issue tended to reduce the differences of class and status. Some of the *Huaqiao* were in favor of immediate and direct action; others saw the strengthening of the government in Peking as the solution to all their problems. In the meantime, however, the ideological venom was spreading. The values which had guided the official representatives of the *Huaqiao* in their relations with the French colonial administration were being discredited; and if this went too far, a deep social crisis would ensue. The notables, whose power depended on the maintenance of social order within the Chinese community, were forced to confront this thorny and depressing situation.

<sup>97</sup> A copy of Sun's program devoid of date and signature was sent to Paris on March 25, 1901 and is to be found in AOM (Aix) GG/F: 20075.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, report to Minister of Colonies, Oct. 7, 1900.

<sup>99</sup> The official mind does not seem to be unanimous on this point. *Ibid.*, Decrais to Doumer, Aug. 9, 1900 and June 20, 1901. See also AOM (Aix) GG/F: 20068, Dubail to Rouvier, Peking, Feb. 19, 1906.

<sup>100</sup> Yen Ching-Hwang, *The Overseas Chinese*, pp. 107-110.

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In about 1905, the discontent which had accumulated in the last five or six years, became directed toward the Immigration and Identification Services. The control mechanisms on Asiatic immigration which had been imposed by the S.I.I. were actually (at least in Saigon where the majority of the immigrants arrived) as long, punctilious and irksome as any excessively formalistic bureaucracy could devise – considering the scant bureaucratic spirit of the time. The immigrants, in groups of 200, each holding a yellow card, were transported on big sampans to a pier and then taken to a large shed where their luggage was kept, and where the first customs operations were carried out. Subsequently, they were put on the sampans once again and taken to another pier, all together in columns, under the watchful eyes of the Vietnamese controllers to the Immigration Bureau after receiving a card which bore their name, age and destination from the delegates of the congregations. There, they were vaccinated and later questioned to obtain additional details on their civil status. A Vietnamese clerk transcribed in *quoc-ngu* the data written in Chinese on their cards. Then, the immigrants were led into a large room divided into stalls where information regarding their physical characteristics was noted (height, description of their facial features, special peculiarities, signs on their faces and arms) and their fingerprints and *diem-chi* were taken. Later, they were transferred to another office where the results of the operations carried out until then were accurately examined by a French clerk and transcribed in a special ledger. The immigrants also received an identification number and a sojourn permit. Finally, in the congregation's offices the membership procedures were completed.

In 1902, the staff of the S.I.I. included 14 Europeans (clerks and officials) and 95 Asians (Indian, Chinese, Vietnamese). Officially the formalities for 600–800 people took one day. When the number of arrivals was higher (they could reach 100–1200) those in excess of this number were made to wait until the following morning in large sheds which could contain as many as 300 people, where the supply of food was rigidly controlled. According to the official mind which, in this case at least is not fully reliable, all the operations were carried out rapidly “in silence and without any sign of discontent on the part of those who were being subjected to them”. Actually, these extenuating practices which the heat, the strain, the weariness, the rough treatment by the Vietnamese controllers, the rudeness of the French clerks made more grueling, became unbearable with time, especially because of the humiliating practice of physical inspection<sup>101</sup>.

<sup>101</sup> This account appears in the official publication *Notice sur le fonctionnement*

At least until 1902, all the Chinese who arrived in Saigon, whatever their sex, rank, social condition, profession or education had to submit to these controls. Apparently there were no cases of corruption, the rich and the notables did not receive preferential treatment and this is probably why the situation became explosive. There may have been scattered incidents every day, but it is certain that in 1905, one event forced the French authorities to confront the political repercussions of this unsustainable state of affairs.

A young diplomat at the Chinese Embassy in Paris, En Jing, member of an official delegation in charge of investigating the conditions of the immigrants in Indochina stopped in Canton on his way to Peking and complained to consul Khan about the disregardful treatment he had received in Saigon and the humiliating controls on his person. These incidents which the consul in Canton pointed out in his August 14 report to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (which was immediately forwarded to Governor General Broni)<sup>102</sup> exasperated the higher-class Chinese, fed on their xenophobia and tended to create tense relations with the government in Peking. A situation which could have the gravest political consequences. Fearing the ensuing political effects, the Quai d'Orsay felt that some forms of action had to be taken. When in that summer of 1905, a second delegation – an unofficial one which nonetheless included high Chinese officials and was led by Zhang Zhen Shun, *persona grata* in Peking – was to go to Cochinchina<sup>103</sup>, Broni immediately asked to exempt its members from the identification formalities<sup>104</sup>.

The men in charge of the S.I.I. felt directly concerned and reacted by writing a detailed report dated September 12, 1905 and signed by the Chief of Service Le Bret. According to Le Bret, the protests of the Chinese notables, justified perhaps in the past, were groundless now. A recent regulation (December 30, 1902 decree) had modified a few of the formalities for Asiatic immigrants and had abolished all the forms of harassment which had been reported. The notables included in the first three tax brackets, bearers of an identity card with a photograph could disembark alone without going through the humiliating experience of being escorted and transferred in columns to the S.I.I. offices; moreover, with “previous

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*du Service de l'Immigration et de l'Identification en Cochinchine* (Saigon, 1902), pp. 4–11.

<sup>102</sup> “Malgré ses protestations et quoiqu'il [En Jing] eut excipé de sa qualité il avait été entraîné par un employé subalterne du Service de l'Immigration au bureau où les asiatiques étaient mesurés et identifiés à l'aide de la méthode Bertillon”. AOM (Aix) GG/F: 22444.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, Kahn to Broni, Aug. 22, 1905; Minister of Colonies to Broni, Sept. 9, 1905.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, Broni to Lieutenant-Governor François Rodier, Aug. 30, 1905.



authorization of the Chief of Service" they could obtain the same right for relatives and friends. Special premises were also made available for them in order to explete discreetly the "administrative formalities". As to En Jing's accusations, they were – Le Bret sustained – untrue. The young diplomat had not been subjected to the controls he had reported to Consul Khan. They had been abolished, Le Bret added, by the Identification section of the Immigration Service and En Jing had certainly been informed of this during his stay in Saigon. It was clear then, that neither he nor his compatriots could have undergone these forms of control. But, since he had visited the office of the Judicial Identification Service, his mind might have been struck (and distorted) by the instruments he had seen there which were used to fight common criminals; although such a confusion – Le Bret said – (wanting to underline his host's bad faith) was improbable since the Immigration and the Identification Bureaus were in two different sections of town<sup>105</sup>.

Le Bret's report was sent by the Lieutenant Governor of Cochinchina Rodier to Broni with a letter which contained a few polemic observations about consul Khan who was almost accused of incompetence and superficiality<sup>106</sup>. This epilogue to the story must not be misunderstood, however. Even if En Jing had been blinded by his xenophobia and had grossly falsified some facts in order to discredit the French colonial regime, it was left to be seen which of his accusations were merely calumnious and which were the result of a different vision of reality. It is obvious that, from this point of view, both Le Bret and Rodier missed the point as far as the incident caused by the young diplomat was concerned. Even if the Chinese were made to disembark rapidly and were taken discreetly to the Immigration Bureau and then to the premises reserved to them, the high ranking Chinese who arrived in Saigon were subject to many formalities from which even the lowest ranking European was exempted. In addition, these formalities were more akin to those imposed on common criminals. There was also a more substantial problem. The "outstanding" notables and those included in the first three tax brackets who were privileged by the 1902 decree amounted to 2,196 people (including the non-Chinese Asians), that is only 1.75% of the *Huaqiao* in Cochinchina; if they had all left the colony and then come back they would have represented 14.1% of the immigrants that year. A series of internal and external circumstances had transformed the issue of formalities imposed on the Chinese immigrants into one which involved the entire Chinese community in Cochinchina without regard to rank or status. From this point of view, the 1902 decree

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<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, report to Rodier, Sept. 12, 1905.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, Sept. 14, 1905.

upon which the colonial administration's new line of conduct regarding Asiatic immigration was based, was shortsighted, belated and absolutely inadequate. It was meant to solve, through a class privilege granted to about 2,000 people, a matter of principle which involved the entire Chinese community in Cochinchina and which ought to have been tackled as such. It served no purpose and had to be quickly abandoned.

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After a period of uncertainty the French colonial administration decided that it had to confer with the leaders of the Chinese community despite the doubts raised by some of its members. The French official mind was more conservative, that is, more favorable to maintaining the status quo, as one went down the echelons. The members of the Immigration and Identification Service, supported in part by the Lieutenant Governor of Cochinchina – François Rodier until March 10, 1906 and later Olivier de Lalande de Calan – were reluctant to accept substantial changes in the procedures, not only for political motives, but also because, if the rumors about the abolition of the Identification Service were true, their “administrative position” would certainly be affected and their salary, career and pension jeopardized<sup>107</sup>. On the other hand, the metropolitan authorities, the Ministry of the Colonies and that of Foreign Affairs pressured by the Chinese diplomacy and considering overall French interests in the Far East wanted a liberal solution to the immigration problem in the briefest delay. Between these two extremes, there were the positions of the general governor (Paul Beau at the time) and his aides. A career diplomat, Beau, who had been the French minister plenipotentiary at the talks in Peking following the Boxer Rebellion, did not underestimate the dangers of an open conflict with Cochinchina's *Huaqiao*. He did not exclude the possibility of a boycott like the one effected in China against American products after a few Chinese students had been subjected to special control measures at some American ports on the West coast<sup>108</sup>. When called upon to disclose his standpoint, he expressed himself in favor of the immediate abolition of the Identification Service<sup>109</sup>. Some members of his entourage, however, feared that the pressures from Paris could bring about “an increased liberalization, harmful to the Colony's political and financial interests”<sup>110</sup>. Others, including Beau's Bureau chief, consul Hardouin,

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<sup>107</sup> AOM (Aix) GG/F: 39828, report to Governor General Paul Beau, April 1906.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, telegram of March 7, 1906.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, telegrams of March 9 and 15, 1906.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, report of June 14, 1906.

were not as worried. Like other career diplomats, Hardouin was sensitive to the problem of keeping good relations with the authorities in Peking and had insistedly asked the governor general to abolish the infamous Identification Service as a sign of good will toward the Chinese government<sup>111</sup>. As author of the project for the reform of the immigration system<sup>112</sup>, he had made every effort to include in the *ad hoc* commission those who would support his cause<sup>113</sup>. When the commission ended its work (he was no longer Bureau chief at the time) he wrote to Beau suggesting that the officials responsible for the Immigration Service be substituted by new men "in order to insure a broad interpretation of the new regulations"<sup>114</sup>.

Created by the general governor's March 9, 1906 decree the commission in charge of "studying the re-organization of the Service for Asiatic Immigration in Cochinchina" met 13 times between March 25 and April 28 of the same year working a total of 36 hours. There were seven French representatives, but of the two men proposed by Hardouin only one had been accepted: Hourant, a career diplomat, and member of the French administration in Bangkok. All the others were officials of the colonial administration and one of them (Krautheimer) was the mayor of Cholon. The Customs Bureau and the Immigration Service, the two administrative sectors more directly concerned, had one representative each<sup>115</sup>. President of the commission was Albert Lorin. Lorin had arrived in Saigon in 1885 at the age of 22 and had attended the *Collège des Interprètes* where he had acquired a perfect command of Vietnamese; he had made his mark as an administrator between 1902 and 1905, when he was responsible for the Chau Doc and My Tho provinces<sup>116</sup>.

The Chinese community in Cochinchina was officially represented by two notables appointed by the congregations. One of them, Luang Hong, was the head of the Canton congregation while the other, Tran-Hoa-Tri, was a Cholon trader. There was a third representative, Li Dang, a shopowner, Cholon municipal councillor and president of the General Assembly of the Congregations, chosen successively by Lieutenant Governor Lalande de Calan, who, in informing the president of his choice

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111 *Ibid.*, telegrams to Beau, March 10, 1906 and to French consul at Mengzi, March 17, 1906.

112 *Ibid.*, report to Beau, May 10, 1906.

113 *Ibid.*, telegram to Beau, March 11, 1906.

114 *Ibid.*, May 9, 1906.

115 *Ibid.*, minutes of the Commission's first meeting, March 25, 1906, p. 1.

116 A. Brebion - A. Cabaton, *Dictionnaire de bio-bibliographie générale ancienne et moderne de l'Indochine française* (Paris, 1935), p. 239.

did not explain why Li Dang had been given a consultative role<sup>117</sup>. Li was to be summoned every time his presence was deemed useful for a smooth progress of the discussions, but he was present at all times, participating in all 13 sessions of the commission. A fourth representative of the Cholon community, Lin Keng (notable and shopowner) was called in at the second session, held on March 27, 1906. He had been chosen by one of the members of the French delegation, the Customs inspector Gogrel<sup>118</sup>. In a letter to the governor general, Lorin explained that the commission had felt it necessary to insure the presence of these men because of the "moral authority they exerted on their compatriots and because of their knowledge of French"<sup>119</sup>.

It seems that the two members designated by the congregations had a secondary role as compared to that of the two notables with consultative functions. In the minutes of the commission, there is no mention of Luang Hong and Tran-Hoa-Tri making requests or expressing their positions although it can be assumed that they took part in the general discussions. Li Dang and Lin Keng's participation, on the other hand, is documented. There are records of the stand they took on certain issues and of the sharp observations made, especially by Li. According to the available sources, the *Huaqiao's* representatives were highly appreciated by the French authorities. In his April 28, 1906 letter addressed to the governor general, Lorin wrote that the Chinese delegates' cooperation "had been precious", that they had participated in the discussion "with relentless zeal", had made proof of "extreme competence", and had expressed their "requests with frankness and without hindrance". He also added that "almost all their requests" had been granted, pointing to their rational behavior and great sense of responsibility for which they deserved their sincere appreciation. This assertion hid the fact that on the significant issue of the fiscal responsibility of the congregations, the expectations of the Chinese delegates were not met. The letter clearly reflected, however, the nature of the relations between the colonial administration's representatives and the notables within the commission. They had a unity of interests which went beyond their contrasts on specific points. This solidarity derived from the fact that the members of the Chinese delegation

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<sup>117</sup> AOM (Aix) GG/F: 39828, Lalande de Calan to Lorin, March 23, 1906. Tran-Hoa-Tri was certainly Chinese even if his name is not immediately recognizable as such. The French administration's practice of basing their recording of Chinese immigrant names on *quoc-ngu* transcriptions was, in fact, the cause of many documented errors.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, minutes, I, March 25, 1906, p. 9.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, Apr. 28, 1906.

were notables and as such represented not only the expectations of the national community which had designated them, but also their class interests which were deeply rooted in the colony's social fabric. From that point of view, they were inclined to collaborate with their French interlocutors. The relations within the commission were, therefore, precisely those indicated by Lorin even though the tone of his letters only partly reflected the nature of the political understanding reached during the discussions.

The first problem discussed was obviously that of reforming the procedures regulating Asiatic immigration. The first session was dominated by Li Dang's accusations. He criticized the identification measures the Chinese were subjected to "without regard to their rank", a clear proof that the December 20, 1902 decree was not being enforced. Li Dang described without exaggerations, but efficaciously, the immigrant's sufferings in the port of Saigon: the transport of the passengers with their luggage aboard the congregations' jammed sampans, the exhausting mass transfers to the Immigration Service's offices, the endless and humiliating formalities for their identification, the long hours spent in extreme discomfort without being able to communicate with "relatives and friends who had come to meet them". He pointed out that nothing of the sort took place in the English and Dutch colonies in Southeast and South Asia – in these colonies "people were free to land without any formalities" – and concluded by asking for the abolition of all the "vexing" measures in force in Cochinchina<sup>120</sup>. The French representatives' reaction to Li Dang's speech clearly showed the authorities' willingness to make concessions as far as the immigration question was concerned, except that Le Bret felt the need to answer Li's accusations. He sustained that they were groundless and referred to past situations. Lorin, at this point, abruptly interrupted, saying that the commission's duty was not to establish whether these criticisms were ill-founded or not, but rather to listen to complaints and take them into account, if this was the case, in order to improve the legislation in force<sup>121</sup>. In his opening speech, Lorin had admitted that the immigration laws were not liberal, were even imprecise and contradictory and that in order to eliminate "all the irksome formalities (...) it [was] essential to give due consideration to the desires of the foreign Asians". His remarks had set the tone of the debate. Therefore, no one opposed Li Dang's request for a complete abolition of the identification procedures. It was only cautiously asked whether the Chinese delegates

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<sup>120</sup> Minutes, I, March 25, 1906, pp. 3-4.

<sup>121</sup> Minutes, II, March 27, 1906, pp. 2-3;

would eventually accept some form of control: a system in which the immigrant could land freely, but had to undergo "summary" identification procedures once he was settled "at the time and on the day which he himself would choose". This solution was not accepted; the Chinese community, through its spokesman Li, informed the French that they were unwilling to accept "*any form of identification no matter how summary*" (underlined in the text) neither upon their arrival nor during their stay in the colony except in the case of suspects".<sup>122</sup>

A final attempt at defeating Li Dang's rigid position was made by the mayor of Cholon, Krautheimer, who suggested that the Chinese residents fulfill only one obligation, that of obtaining a sojourn card with a photograph "which would be glued by the head of the congregation, (...) a document which would be helpful to the card holder himself when asked to give proof of his identity in administrative offices such as the Post Office or the Treasury"<sup>123</sup>. The Chinese delegation replied that the "matter would be examined"; but when the question of the photograph was brought up again on April 21, during the 11th session, Li asserted that such a formality was unacceptable, just like all the other forms of identification, and that the immigrants' signature was enough to prove his identity<sup>124</sup>. After this episode, the French stopped insisting and all mediating efforts were abandoned.

Later, the discussion of the single articles of Hardouin's proposal created a few technical problems. Wanting to abolish all the measures the Chinese considered unfair, Hardouin had proposed that the few formalities which would be included in the forthcoming decree (medical examination, customs control, sojourn permit) be completed on board the ships bringing the immigrants to Cochinchina. This solution was rejected by everyone, but it was agreed that the medical examination could be done before landing.

During the discussion of article 1 concerning the sojourn card, the Chinese representatives obtained another concession, this time favorable only to the merchant oligarchy and to the property owners. But despite the abolition of the degrading identification procedures, the issuing of a sojourn card took considerable time because the gathering of personal data on place of origin and destination of the immigrant could not be waived. These "summary" forms of control were not really needed however, for the well-off Chinese did not dodge the entry tax.

On March 15, Li Dang sounded out the participants on this point,

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<sup>122</sup> Minutes, I, March 25, 1906, pp. 2, 6.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>124</sup> Minutes, XI, Apr. 21, 1906, p. 14.

complaining that it was the lack of distinctions "on the basis of rank and social standing" which made the current laws so objectionable. A few days later, Lin Keng proposed a solution. The immigrants were to be divided into two categories: one made of "shopowners and notables for whom the congregations would accept responsibility" and could, therefore, on arrival, leave the port of entry without undergoing any formalities; the other made of "coolies and other individuals whom the congregations would not trust", who would still disembark in groups and undergo all necessary formalities in order to "pay the prescribed taxes immediately". This proposal was included in the final draft approved by the commission<sup>125</sup>. The class criterion was found so practical and convincing that the commission adopted it in formulating articles 12 and 22, concerning the issue of passports and temporary permits to transit passengers<sup>126</sup> in the port of Saigon<sup>127</sup>.

The discussion of articles 1, 12 and 22 proved that the Chinese did not want to miss the opportunity to consolidate the class privileges that the French law, with its principles of formal equality, had granted them to a limited degree. But, they also took the opportunity to defend the civil rights of the entire community.

Since the first session, Li Dang had asked that control on the women immigrants be carried out by women inspectors, that taxes be waived for everyone over 60, that 18 be considered the minimum age for paying them, that the fees for the exit visa (an alternative to the more expensive passport) be reduced and that the regulations which restricted the free movement of the *Huaqiao* who wanted to travel to Cambodia – a measure which affected peddlers and seasonal workers – be abolished<sup>128</sup>. Their greatest success, however, came with the April 10th session, the eighth one, during the discussions of the police powers which had been conferred on the Immigration Service in accordance with article 8 of the February 27, 1899 decree, and of the limits to personal liberties set in articles 32 and 33 of the February 19, 1890 ordinance. The Chinese once again through Li Dang and Lim Keng took a firm stand. They asked that the right to enter the home of Asians without a warrant be rescinded and that the provision establishing a jail term for the immigrants found without a sojourn card be amended to allow their release upon request by the head of their congregation<sup>129</sup>.

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125 Minutes, II, March 27, 1906, pp. 5–8.

126 Minutes, IV, Apr. 1, 1906, pp. 5–7.

127 Minutes, V, Apr. 3, 1906, pp. 12–14.

128 Minutes, I, March 25, 1906, p. 5.

129 Minutes, VIII, Apr. 10, 1906, pp. 4–5.

Although the debate on the fees for the exit visa was long and rather technical (since there was the problem of lowering the fees for the poor, while at the same time insuring the stability of the colony's budget) none of the requests were opposed by the French representatives<sup>130</sup>. As to the protection of civil liberties in the light of the police powers of the Immigration agents, the Chinese representative gained some ground. Krautheimer, as chief of the Cholon municipality's police corps and Le Bret, as director of the Immigration service, assured them that the serious inconveniences which had been caused because of the "wrong application" of the 1890 decree would not be encountered. Lorin, on his part, considered "legitimate" the criticisms to the "draconian dispositions" of article 8 of the February 8, 1899 decree and the commission voted unanimously in favor of their abolition<sup>131</sup>. The text which was later approved, explicitly prevented the Immigration agents from entering the Asiatic immigrants' home if not on the basis of the laws in force and reasserted that the right to search Asiatic premises, established by the previous regulations, applied only to public places in their opening hours. Regarding this last point, Krautheimer insisted on the fact that no inspection "was allowed in public places while the Asians [were] having a party or a banquet". To this, the commission had no objections<sup>132</sup>.

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Krautheimer's observations indicate how friendly the atmosphere was at the meetings of the commission. The liberalization of the immigration regulations, however, had not placated the Chinese delegation. The new dispositions had increased the responsibility of the congregations' headmen and notables who had to guarantee for the entire community vis-à-vis the French administration. This was certainly an untimely change. The crisis through which colonial society was passing had intensified social insubordination, causing difficulties for the French colonial administration and preoccupying the Chinese financial oligarchy. Order and discipline could not be kept within the community in such a precarious situation. Who could insure that tax evasion, so common among the poor, would not spread? How could the congregations control a higher number of tax dodgers? And how could they face additional financial burden? No one could give a definite answer to these questions, but it is obvious that, given the situation, the notables wanted to limit their responsibility. When on April 1st, during

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<sup>130</sup> Minutes, X, Apr. 17, 1906, pp. 9-11.

<sup>131</sup> Minutes, VIII, Apr. 10, 1906, pp. 5-6.

<sup>132</sup> Minutes, XI, Apr. 21, 1906, pp. 10-11.



the 4th session, article 13 of Hardouin's bill was being discussed, the Chinese representatives readily accepted the proposal which deprived them of the control over contract laborers. But, among the French representatives, only Hourant was in favor<sup>133</sup>. During the 8th session (April 10) Lin Keng, complaining that French laws on vagrancy were "excessively liberal", suggested that control be intensified over the "vagrants" who came to Cochinchina "to live at the expense of their compatriots for a few years" and whose behavior weighed unfairly "on the honest, industrious and trading sectors of the Asiatic population"<sup>134</sup>. The commission unanimously agreed to impose harsher punishment on vagrants and petty criminals<sup>135</sup>.

Drastic, repressive measures could obviously be a remedy, but since the police department depended on the French Colonial administration, the generic commitments taken by the local authorities must not have appeared convincing to the Chinese members of the commission. They, therefore, opted for a different approach. Conscious of their subordinate political role and convinced that the logic behind the collaboration scheme could not be modified, they concentrated their efforts on two limited objectives which had the advantage of being obtainable. First, they aimed at strengthening the power of the notables within the congregations and then, at revising the norms regulating their fiscal responsibility toward the colony's Treasury.

The power of the notables in the congregations was fixed by the unwritten laws of tradition. In the first years of their existence, the congregations had progressively selected as their leaders, their most authoritative members, those who were well-off or had well-established business relations. These last attributes were particularly important since their chief tasks consisted in giving an advance to the new members who were without means of support and in helping the more prosperous *Huaqiao* send their savings to China to be invested productively<sup>136</sup>.

Aware of this state of things, the French had sanctioned the congregations' role by restricting access to its top rank to the upper strata of the population - those belonging to the first two categories established by the February 19, 1890 decree. But at the same time, they had extended the voting right to all those who paid the poll tax, that is to the entire population, exception being made of the sick, of those over 60 and of the hired contract workers. In addition, to avoid the election of undesired

133 Minutes, IV, Apr. 1, 1906, pp. 7-9 and V, Apr. 3, 1906, pp. 2-7.

134 Minutes, VIII, Apr. 10, 1906, p. 1.

135 Minutes, XIII, Apr. 28, 1906, p. 6.

136 Nguyen Quoc Dinh, *Les Congrégations chinoises*, p. 26.

members, (i.e. those unwilling to collaborate with the administration), the nomination of the elected members had been subordinated to the governor general's approval, as far back as 1871. Furthermore, the 1890 decree contained a specific norm according to which the constituency elected three men out of which the governor general would choose the one considered most suitable<sup>137</sup>.

It is hard to say whether the voting right was extended because it was found politically convenient, or to support an abstract democratic principle, or both; but the fact remains that the governor general's right of veto disturbed the congregations' organization. Traditionally the heads of the congregations had no formally defined powers, they were the trusted men of the council of notables<sup>138</sup>; the 1890 decree had turned them into the trusted men of the colonial administration. At the beginning of the century, as discontent was becoming more widespread, the notables accepted with increasing "disgust" the elective charges offered them, while the number of voters was decreasing. In the Hoc-trang province in 1905, only 5.64% of the voters went to the polls<sup>139</sup>. Scepticism and distrust were growing, the headmen of the congregations could not handle a system of power based on universal suffrage in which the voice of "simple coolies" (this is the expression used in a 1905 French document) counted more than the authoritative one of the merchants<sup>140</sup>. Elected in a socio-psychological context alien to them, having to compete with parvenus who used demagogy to obtain consensus, possessing considerable formal authority (guaranteed by the colonial authorities' investiture) but deprived of substantial power (which could only be had from their peers) the most eminent notables started to retire more and more from politics leaving room for drab figures or adventurers without scruples, mere instruments of the French. All this can probably explain the limited participation of the Soc-trang voters in the 1905 election.

The choice of the Chinese representatives in the Lorin commission and their participation to the discussions clearly reflect the crisis of political leadership the congregations had suffered in the last few years. Li Dang and Lin Keng had been designated because of their personal authority in the community and they were the ones who, in fact, contributed most incisively to the discussions. As trusted men of the financial oligarchy,

<sup>137</sup> *Bulletin Officiel de la Cochinchine*, 1871, pp. 322-323; *Recueil permanent*, I, p. 224.

<sup>138</sup> AOM (Aix) GG/F: 20260. *Notes sur le Service de l'Immigration des étrangers asiatiques*, n.d., pp. 3-5.

<sup>139</sup> AOM (Aix) GG/F: 166. *Rapport d'ensemble*, January-February 1905.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, *Rapport d'ensemble*, July-August 1905.

they took over the functions of the official delegates – most likely with these latter's assent. This role shift was accepted and to a certain extent supported by the French who, in so doing, were making sure that their interlocutors would ensure the functioning of the consultation mechanism they had created. Since this solution, however, was an empirical one which could neither be formalized nor generalized, the French members of the commission decided to accept the changes the Chinese notables had been asking for; namely the abolition of universal suffrage in electing the congregations' headmen.

It was Le Bret who expressed the notables' requests during the 6th session, on April 5. It is difficult to understand why the Chinese did not take the initiative; perhaps they preferred to avoid raising directly an issue involving class interests and which was the result of obvious political calculations. Nevertheless, when asked to express their opinion they did not hesitate in asking that voting rights be restricted to the "outstanding" category and to the first three tax brackets. This solution was accepted in principle, but taking the floor immediately afterwards, Krautheimer underlined the differences which existed between the Saigon and Cholon congregations and those of the interior; outside those two large centers, there were few merchants and property owners, a less complex class structure and therefore, different regulations had to be established. This judicious observation was taken in due account. It was agreed that in the provinces of the interior, the constituency would include all holders of licenses and all those who paid the agricultural tax<sup>141</sup>. A norm which allowed the lower strata of the merchant communities in the provinces to participate in the political life of the congregations, and which did not particularly please the Chinese members of the Lorin commission who, however, imposed their standpoint for the Saigon-Cholon conurbation where the bulk of the *Huaqiao* lived. As to the "despised coolies", nowhere were they given the voting right and no one pleaded their cause. For the electoral procedures the French immediately accepted the Chinese requests without discussion, including them in article 25 of the new law.

The issue of the congregations' fiscal responsibility, on the other hand, was debated at length and the positions of the two sides proved to be irreconcilable despite the moderate and formal tone of the debate. The Chinese's lack of flexibility derived from the fact that the fiscal measures implemented since 1871 had increased the corporate responsibility of the congregations in fiscal matters. The colonial administration's sole function

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<sup>141</sup> AOM (Aix) GG/F: 39828, minutes, VI, Apr. 5, 1906, pp. 5-6.

was to take a census of the immigrants and send the payment orders to the congregations whose role, as tax collectors, started with the arrival of the immigrant and ended with his expulsion or death.

Since taxes for the first year were paid upon registration in the congregation; the newcomers presented no problems; if they wanted to set foot in Cochinchina they had to pay their dues. For the following years, however, the difficulties grew for the congregations. Within December 31 of each year, the headmen had to send to the Colony's Treasury a list of all the taxpayers – already classified – for the following year. The congregations' books had to be constantly updated in order to identify and control all the immigrants immediately. If one of them disappeared, the congregations were still liable for him, until a death certificate, or a formal act of expulsion from one of the congregations, or a banishment order underwritten by the colonial administration allowed that the missing person be excluded from the tax payers' lists. In case of disappearance, deletion from the lists could take place only after the police had had sufficient time to search for the tax evader, imprison him, give him a hearing and expel him from the colony. In case of death or expulsion for political or criminal motives, considerable delay was caused by the bureaucratic formalities. The financial burden for the immigrants' residence in jail and return trip home rested on the congregations<sup>142</sup>, a charge the headmen had accepted with little enthusiasm and the reduction of which they had unavailingly asked for in a petition to Governor General Piquet on June 24, 1889<sup>143</sup>.

When the Lorin commission met in March of 1906 to deal with the reform of the immigration laws, the notables were determined to call attention to the question of their fiscal responsibility. At the first session, Li Dang went directly to the heart of the matter demanding that provision be made to modify the list of taxpayers whenever the need arose; he expressly asked for the immediate deletion of all those who were dead, expelled or had disappeared<sup>144</sup>. The issue was discussed again in the 5, 6, 7, 8 and 10th sessions during which the requests of the Chinese delegates came out in the open. Li Dang and his friends sustained that it was "extremely difficult" for the headmen to know the exact number of the congregations' members, many of whom were "unknown to them" and therefore escaped "their control". He also added that the congregations

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<sup>142</sup> *Courrier de Saigon*, Nov. 25, 1874 and *Recueil permanent*, I, pp. 222–224. See also Nguyen Quoc Dinh, *Les Congrégations chinoises*, pp. 141–177 *passim*.

<sup>143</sup> The administration's refusal can be evinced from a note from Doumer to his Bureau Chief, July 1, 1898. AOM (Aix) GG/F: 22481.

<sup>144</sup> AOM (Aix) GG/F: 39828, minutes, I, March 25, 1906, p. 7.

did not have the means to "look for and arrest the tax evaders". Under these conditions the compilation of the tax payers' list by December 31 was extremely binding and had meant for the sole congregation in Canton a net loss of 770,000 piastres (which had been reduced to 440,000 by the administration) in the last three years. The headmen wanted that those who disappeared be grouped with the tax evaders and that this act of social insubordination be punished by immediate expulsion from the colony.

There was a cold and negative reply to the Chinese representatives' passionate plea because the services the congregations rendered the French were too valuable to be renounced and, obviously, because the whole collaboration scheme centered on the principle of fiscal responsibility. The French were willing to discuss only a few minor points: the reduction of jail expenses and that of the time required to make an act of expulsion valid<sup>147</sup>. Since they were opposed to any major changes on the question of responsibility, in a system which had worked perfectly well, they were adamant. As to the controls the Chinese representatives were unable to carry out for lack of means, the president of the colonial council, Marquié, suggested a new subdivision of the Saigon-Cholon area in a number of districts, each one entrusted to a delegate – a proposal Li Dang rejected as unfeasible and costly. In the end, however, the French decided that "it was up to the headmen to look for the best means to alleviate" their responsibility without obviously "infringing upon the existent regulations"<sup>148</sup>. Then, the disorderly progress of the meeting induced the President, Lorin, to put an end to the debate at the beginning of the 8th session by saying à propos of Lin Keng's remarks that "the fiscal obligations imposed on the congregations were a logical outcome of the solidarity which was at the basis of their constitution" and that "solidarity could not be conceived of, without collective responsibility"<sup>149</sup>.

Basically right, this observation disregarded, however, an essential point: the development of the colonial society and the democratization of the electoral process imposed by the French had profoundly modified the relations between the congregation and its members according to a line of development the French considered positive and certainly inevitable; but that the Chinese deemed negative and wanted to oppose. In his reply to Lorin, Lin Keng recognized the "exactness" of the president's

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, minutes, V, Apr. 3, 1906, p. 10 and VII, Apr. 8, 1906, p. 3.

<sup>146</sup> Minutes, I, March 25, 1906, p. 7.

<sup>147</sup> Minutes, VI, Apr. 5, 1906, pp. 10–11.

<sup>148</sup> Minutes, VII, Apr. 8, 1906, pp. 3–4.

<sup>149</sup> Minutes, VIII, Apr. 10, 1906, pp. 1–2.

words, but in a desperate attempt at defending his position he added that "not all the Chinese were members of the Congregation in the same right" and that, to be precise, "it was made of individuals who offered some guarantees"<sup>150</sup>. A clear indication of the problems the notables, as representatives of the Chinese leadership, had to face.

The congregations were born as free associations of people belonging to different social strata and directed by an oligarchy of merchants and propertyowners who guaranteed the protection of all their members. The transformations brought about by the development of the colonial economy and the new regulations introduced by the French aroused divergent reactions. On the one hand, the notables continued claiming their traditional leadership role; on the other, they began to defend their class interests. This could be ascribed to a lack of class consciousness, but it must not be forgotten that the Chinese had scant political power. Although the collaboration system had given them ample space for developing their economic activities, it had also established narrow confines to their political autonomy. It is obvious that at a time of social crisis, when the economic burden for the leaders of the community was growing, the merchant oligarchy tended to defend exclusively its own economic interests. They could have had a different attitude, they could have demanded greater political power in exchange for the economic sacrifices they had accepted; but the collaboration scheme imposed by the French was founded on rigid authoritarian principles and a request for political rights would have implied an open conflict and a clash with the colonial administration, which the *Huaqiao* had no chance of overcoming and were, in fact, avoided.

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The reforms proposed by the Lorin Commission became operative on October 16, 1906 and January 12, 1907; but the two decrees were received with little enthusiasm by the upper strata of the Chinese community. The preservation of the fiscal responsibility of the Congregations irritated the notables who considered this financial burden unbearable. Conscious of the fact that the colonial administration would not have compromised on the principle of responsibility, but convinced that they had to take action in order to protect their interests, they persisted in their attempts at solving the long-standing issue of the immediate cancellation of dead or missing persons from the tax lists and of instituting harsher forms of punishment for tax evaders. To this end, they suggested that these latter be no longer tried in common courts which, had slow and complex proce-

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<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

dures, but be judged by the Immigration Service. The colonial administration recognized the need for change, but, in practice, did very little. Lorin who was in charge of a new commission with the task of drawing up proposals for changes to be brought to the 1906–07 decrees opposed the notables' requests on financial and juridical grounds<sup>151</sup>. The French authorities, on their part, were not very eager to take the necessary steps to enforce the new measures immediately and effectively. The Chinese translation of the October 16 decree was printed only two years later, in October 1908<sup>152</sup>, whereas the first copies became available only in May of the following year<sup>153</sup>. In the meantime, the heads of the congregations were forced to require insistently that the landing procedures to which the new immigrants were subject be abolished, especially the exasperating slowness with which the medical controls were carried out by the Immigration officials<sup>154</sup>.

The curt refusal to rescind the principle of fiscal responsibility was compensated by a few important concessions made to the notables and rich merchants who, in the past, had insisted that their treatment be adequate to their rank. Significantly, the Information Service – the bureaucratic structure more directly involved in reviewing the norms on Asian immigration – put forth a valid proposal. In a report to the lieutenant-governor dated March 5, 1907, the head of the Information Service suggested eliminating the “minute formalities” – which hindered the freedom of movement – for all the rich and eminent Chinese; therefore, not only for those who belonged to the higher tax brackets, but also for all those who “although actively engaged in commercial and industrial activities” were neither licensed nor included in the land tax lists – full and limited partners in the trading companies, *compradores* and the like<sup>155</sup>. This proposal expressed in clearer terms the liberal policies the Lorin Commission had recommended a few months earlier. For the first time in forty years, the French colonial administration seemed to have become conscious of the fact that the upper strata of the Chinese community were an essential factor in keeping social order and stability and as such had to be trusted, accepted for what they were, and be treated differently from the rest of their compatriots.

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<sup>151</sup> AOM (Aix) GG/F: 39828, Lorin to Rodier, May 31, 1907.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, Lieutenant-Governor Ernest Outrey to interim Governor General Louis-Alphonse Bonhoure, Oct. 10, 1908.

<sup>153</sup> Outrey to Governor General Klobukowski, May 12, 1909.

<sup>154</sup> This dissatisfaction is reflected in Rodier's report to Beau, March 12, 1907. AOM (Aix) GG/F: 22478.

<sup>155</sup> AOM (Aix) GG/F: 39828.

This recognition, however, was not to be seen as a first step toward the granting of political privileges and, in fact, the lieutenant-governor reluctantly accepted the reform which reduced administration control over the nomination of the Congregations' headmen. Dissatisfied with the sole ratifying power the 1906 decree had given him, he suggested going back to the previous system which allowed the Chinese electoral body to designate three candidates from which the governor would choose the most suitable; that is, the most subservient one<sup>156</sup>.

Even after the colonial administration had reached an accord – albeit belatedly – with the notables, the problem of Chinese immigration remained at issue. Since the norms regulating the exemption of the poll tax for the elderly were quite restrictive, widespread discontent ensued; while no official refutation came from the Immigration Service in answer to the notables' formal protest against the slowness of the medical visits. Despite the publicity given to the norms contained in the 1906 and 1907 decrees – which had helped to dissipate “some unpleasant misunderstandings” – the condition of the immigrants continued to be watched with great concern in China<sup>157</sup>. The government in Peking, which had signed an agreement with the French to curb the activities of the reformist and revolutionary agitators infiltrated into Indochina<sup>158</sup>, continued its action, although discreetly, to better the lot of its subjects in the French colony<sup>159</sup>. The Chinese press denounced the excessive poll tax and the “vexations of all sorts” to which the *Huaqiao* were subjected<sup>160</sup>. Even if the French Consular offices denied most of the alarming news diffused<sup>161</sup>, the sense of frustration and humiliation over the crushed national pride increased; especially since the rumors were not always without grounds. But it was only later, when the new procedures regarding the control of persons on the

<sup>156</sup> AOM (Aix) GG/F: 39835, report to Governor General Luce, July 28, 1911.

<sup>157</sup> AOM (Aix) GG/F: 39828, report of March 28, 1908.

<sup>158</sup> Details on the local consequences of this accord can be found in the report by the French resident at Lang-sou, dated September, 1909. AOM (Aix) GG/F: 22465. See also AOM (Aix) GG/F: 20465, report by resident superior in Tonkin, Jan. 5, 1912.

<sup>159</sup> The French authorities' preoccupation with the attitude of the Peking government is reflected in the telegram by Bonhoure (lieutenant-governor of Cochinchina at the time) to Klobukowski, Nov. 4, 1908. AOM (Aix) GG/F: 22442. See also AOM (Aix) GG/F: 22476, the French consul at Hong Kong to Broni, Jan. 2, 1907; AOM (Aix) GG/F: 20097, report by the French Ministry's envoy to Yunnan to Klobukowski, Feb. 23, 1909; AOM (Aix) GG/F: 18277, note by French Ambassador Coty to the Chinese government in Canton, May 29, 1913.

<sup>160</sup> Excerpts from the Chinese press which show strong anti-French feelings can be found in AOM (Aix) GG/F: 22476 and 22477.

<sup>161</sup> AOM (Aix) GG/F: 20045, French consul at Hankou to Luce, Oct. 5, 1911.



territory began to be applied that the situation became critical. It was at this point, in fact, that the real nature of the 1906 agreement began to be questioned.

There is no doubt that the 1906–1907 decrees had rendered control over the *Huaqiao* more difficult and somewhat “illusory”<sup>162</sup>. The immediate result of the norms liberalizing the granting of passes to Cambodia was that the Chinese traders, whose activities were concentrated in the three Western provinces of Cochinchina, moved their official residence to the other side of the Mekong river where taxes were lower<sup>163</sup>. The procedures aimed at determining personal identity, on the other had, created enormous problems. The abolition of physical identity requirements made it extremely difficult to locate those who owned no property or had no easily identifiable commercial activity; in practice, all those who belonged to the last two tax brackets: the entire Chinese community minus 2,500 people. In his 1909 report, the Lieutenant Governor, Ernest Outrey, denounced the high number of Chinese tax evaders who coming back to Cochinchina after a period of absence, passed for – and were registered as – new immigrants to avoid paying the overdue poll tax<sup>164</sup>. According to Outrey’s successor, Maurice Gourbeil, the number of Chinese expelled, because of penal or administrative actions, who re-entered the colony under an assumed name was so high toward the end of 1911, that sojourn cards had become “real bank notes which could be very advantageously placed”. A great many people in Saigon–Cholon and even in the inner provinces, in fact, circulated with documents they had either bought or borrowed from an obliging friend or relative<sup>165</sup>.

With time, criticisms against the 1906–1907 legislation grew stronger and more pressing within the colonial administration; a fact which led to a situation of great tension very much like the one which had developed prior to the setting up of the Lorin Commission. The services which depended on the lieutenant-governor and were directly responsible for the bureaucratic apparatus which fought fiscal evasion and kept public order were increasingly more hostile to the reforms and aimed at abolishing them. On the other hand, the General Governor’s collaborators were reluctant to accept the line of conduct their Saigon colleagues suggested. The iron fist between the lieutenant-governor and the governor general had alternate phases. Gourbeil’s proposal – made in the spring of 1910 – to fight fiscal

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<sup>162</sup> AOM (Aix) GG/F: 39828, Lieutenant-Governor of Cochinchina Maurice Gourbeil to Governor General Albert Sarraut, May 29, 1912.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, Gourbeil to interim Governor General Picquié, Feb. 28, 1910.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, May 29, 1909.

<sup>165</sup> Gourbeil to Sarraut, Nov. 25, 1911.

evaders residing in Cochinchina's western provinces by going back to the previous repressive legislation (the October 2, 1905 decree) was not approved for political reasons<sup>166</sup> and neither was a return to the former system of electing the heads of the Congregations accepted<sup>167</sup>. However, on the issue of the personal identity of immigrants belonging to the lower strata (the most important question for the administration and the one most likely to provoke hostile reaction among the *Huaqiao*) the lieutenant-governor had his way. Actually, the problem of personal identity had too many administrative implications to be solved through a political compromise. If an individual did not belong to one of the first three tax brackets or to the outstanding category, cases in which a photograph was put on his Identity Card, it was impossible to establish his identity only on the basis of origin<sup>168</sup>. Gourbeil had no difficulty, therefore, in gaining support for his proposal to modify article 2 of the October 1906 decree, making the taking of fingerprints mandatory for all Asian residents belonging to the 4th and 5th tax groups<sup>169</sup>.

In a note dated December 12, 1911 the chief of the governor general's political bureau agreed that the measures so urgently requested by the Saigon authorities were necessary<sup>170</sup>. And, on January 23, 1912 a decree bearing the signature of the new Governor General, Albert Sarraut, imposed the taking of fingerprints over the entire territory.

Even though there were no immediate problems for its application, (the Immigration Services reported that the fingerprinting operations were carried out in "perfect order")<sup>171</sup>, the January 23, 1912 decree was far from being welcomed by the Chinese community. Especially since this addition to the decree had not been discussed with the *Comité de perfectionnement de l'Immigration* which had been set up by Governor General Beau in 1908 to "study permanently" all the measures concerning Asiatic immigration in Cochinchina<sup>172</sup>. This fact had particularly annoyed those

<sup>166</sup> Report to governor general of June 18, 1910.

<sup>167</sup> AOM (Aix) GG/F: 39835, Luce to Gourbeil, Aug. 10, 1911.

<sup>168</sup> Garros points out that the Chinese names which appear in official papers were "grossly deformed" because of the *quoc-ngu* transcriptions, or were sometimes erroneously recorded by the French officials since the landing operations were so chaotic. In addition, if a Chinese arrived from Singapore or Hong Kong he had an anglicized name; and often the Chinese "for interested motives or without rhyme or reason", changed their names, and adopted new ones according to their age. G. Garros, *Les usages de la Cochinchine*, p. 79.

<sup>169</sup> AOM (Aix) GG/F: 39828, report to Sarraut, Nov. 25, 1911.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, the note was addressed to the governor of Cochinchina.

<sup>171</sup> Gourbeil to Sarraut, May 29, 1912.

<sup>172</sup> Note addressed by the Chinese Chamber of Commerce in Cholon to Sarraut, July 24, 1912.

notables who had avocated a policy of collaboration with the colonial administration. It is significant that one of the leaders of the protest movement which immediately developed after the passing of the decree was Li Dang, the respected merchant and member of Cholon's municipal council who, in 1906, together with Lin Keng, had been one of the most prestigious Chinese representatives in the Lorin Commission<sup>173</sup>. The notables saw the taking of fingerprints as an offense, but the Immigration officials hardly understood their reasons. In China, this practice was reserved for the kidnappers of children and in Indochina, for common criminals. In addition, no white immigrant was subject to it and neither were the citizens of sovereign states like Japan or Thailand. How was it then that only the Chinese, among the citizens of independent states, had to endure this humiliation which deeply hurt their honor and national dignity?

These arguments which focused on the moral and juridical aspects of the problem were taken up by a group of Saigon and Cholon "industriels, usiniers and négociants" who sent "a desperate appeal" to Sarraut<sup>174</sup>. Their entreaty obtained some result. The governor general wrote to Gourbeil urging him to apply the new measure "with judgment" and to elicit from the heads of the Congregations suggestions as to their application "which he would gladly consider".<sup>175</sup>

According to the indirect sources available on this point, the notables' reaction was firm in principle, but they suggested a solution. The Chinese declaredly "held to their request for outright abolition of fingerprinting", but they were willing to accept, as a substitute, the affixing of a photograph on all sojourn permits of foreign Asians "*sans distinction de catégorie*". Firm and somewhat angry was Gourbeil's reaction. He pleaded his point of view very aptly, mentioning in passing that in the United States the European immigrants were subject to longer and more minute formalities than those applied to foreign Asians in Indochina. He also underlined the financial benefits the colony had drawn from the January 23 decree - implying that it was indispensable to fight fiscal evasion. In addition, he objected to the substitution of fingerprints with a photograph judging this solution impracticable and too costly for the administration. And he strongly criticized the notables who were leading the protest movement, especially Li Dang, sustaining that they were exploiting the new dispositions, making them "an imaginary source of vexations and humiliations" for their compatriots solely for personal reasons, to gain prestige and

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<sup>173</sup> Gourbeil to Sarraut, May 29, 1912.

<sup>174</sup> Letter of April 12, 1912.

<sup>175</sup> Sarraut to Gourbeil, May 4, 1912.

political credit within the Chinese community<sup>176</sup>. It is difficult at this point to understand what was Sarraut's real position in front of these contrasting arguments. In July, he held a private audience with the members of Cholon's Chinese Chamber of Commerce. The results of this meeting can only be evinced from the letter the Chinese sent him on the 24th of that month to thank him for his amiability. The most probable hypothesis is that Sarraut convinced of the need to avoid a crisis, but not wanting to disavow the lieutenant-governor, tried to take time. The references made in the letter indicate that he promised to "examine the question of fingerprinting carefully"; a vague and non-binding statement. The notables, however, took advantage of this and asked that this study be assigned to the *Comité de perfectionnement de l'Immigration* or to an *ad hoc* commission like the one headed by Lorin in 1906<sup>177</sup>. It is not clear how things evolved after this; very little information is available, but it is reasonable to think that the outcome disappointed the Chinese. The commission they had asked for, started to be organized concretely only at the end of the year – this is known because only then, did the six merchants and heads of the congregations, called to participate, ask the administration for an interpreter. Moreover, the curt style of the missive revealed the coldness of the French-Chinese relations<sup>178</sup>. Furthermore, there is no indication that this commission ever met. And, unlike what took place in 1905–06, the outcome of the crisis was not an accord between the French Administration and the representatives of the Chinese community. Even though a joint commission met at the beginning of 1913, it worked very little in the first 18 months; at any rate, no official document ensued; and if the negotiations to modify the January 23, 1912 decree were being carried out, they were interrupted in the summer of 1914 by the outbreak of the war in Europe<sup>179</sup>.

In the following eight years, until the publication of the October 27, 1922 decree, no changes were brought to the mechanisms which regulated Asiatic immigration in Cochinchina. And even when this decree was passed, it did not solve the questions which had been raised ten years earlier, nor confront the new issues which had come forth since. In November of 1918, the 3 Piastres raise of the poll tax – a particularly

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<sup>176</sup> Gourbeil to Sarraut, May 29, 1912.

<sup>177</sup> Note addressed to Sarraut, July 24, 1912.

<sup>178</sup> Note addressed to Sarraut, Nov. 12, 1912.

<sup>179</sup> AOM (Aix) GG/F: 47385, Gourbeil to Governor General Van Volenhoven, Aug. 13, 1914 (telegram); Van Volenhoven to Gourbeil, Aug. 14, 1914 (telegram); Van Volenhoven to French consuls to Shanghai, Xiamen, Fuzhou, Canton and Hong Kong Aug. 14, 1914 (telegrams).

harsh measure for the small traders and salaried workers at a time of economic crisis – provoked a moderate answer on the part of the Chinese community<sup>180</sup>. In the mid '20s, however, the relations between the French colonial administration and the *Huaqiao* were once again in a state of crisis, owing to the excessive fiscal pressure, the controls on the population and, more important, the deteriorating relations with the Vietnamese agents of the *Suret * who had begun to treat the Chinese with extreme brutality<sup>181</sup>. As had always happened at times of acute tension, the Chinese national press intensified its attacks against the French colonial regime<sup>182</sup>, but this time even the Saigon and Cholon notables, openly called on the government in Peking to take the necessary diplomatic steps in Paris to modify a situation considered unsustainable<sup>183</sup>. Even if chaos reigned in China, the *Huaqiao* felt more confident than in the last years of the Qing dynasty; their natural pride being now heightened, they became more demanding. The notables' attitude in defending the community's interests grew more rigid, and consequently the French colonial administration looked upon them with increasing suspicion. In April 1925, to commemorate Sun Yat-sen's death, almost 20,000 people gathered at the Chamber of Commerce in Cholon<sup>184</sup>, and riotous episodes took place to protest against the prohibition of demonstrations and public assemblies; for this, a note of grievance was sent to the lieutenant governor of Cochinchina<sup>185</sup> who described it as "subversive"<sup>186</sup>.

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Even though the war had created an emergency situation – worsened by the fear that the German secret services could find among the *Huaqiao* the agents who could be used to operate against French territories in the Far East<sup>187</sup> – it was not the main cause of the deteriorating relations between the administration and the Chinese community in the 1920s.

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<sup>180</sup> AOM (Aix) GG/F; 50952, note addressed to Sarraut, November, 1918.

<sup>181</sup> AOM (Aix) GG/F; 17914, note addressed to the general governor and to the governor of Cochinchina, May, 16, 1925 (*Requ te adress e par le nomm  Han Kao, représentant des congr gations chinoises a.s. de la situation malheureuse des Chinois de Cochinchine*).

<sup>182</sup> Excerpts from the Chinese press in AOM (Aix) GG/F: 39837.

<sup>183</sup> AOM (Aix) GG/F: 17914, copy of an article published in *Beijing Ribao*, May 25, 1925.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*, report addressed to the governor of Cochinchina, Apr. 16, 1925.

<sup>185</sup> Note of May 16, 1925.

<sup>186</sup> Report addressed to governor general, June 30, 1925.

<sup>187</sup> Details on this point can be found in AOM (Aix) GG/F: 39832,

Already in 1914, the friendly relations existing in 1906 had worsened and never improved again, not even after the end of the war.

An analysis of the circumstances which led to this negative trend is beyond the purpose of this essay, but it is interesting to note that in the years following the war, the position of the Chinese in the collaboration system gradually weakened. They were still the keystones of the colonial economy, but their supremacy began to be questioned on account of two concomitant factors: the growing presence of French capitalism and the development of a Vietnamese national movement.

The first was not to have immediate consequences. Even if in the long run it would have led to the exclusion of the *Huaqiao* from the technologically advanced sectors and from those more strictly linked to the international market, the Chinese businessmen would have kept control of the traditional sectors which were more congenial to them. The second one was, on the other hand, a more immediate and serious threat. It questioned the moral and political bases of the collaboration system on which the wealth of the colony was founded.

The unwritten pact the French had with the *Huaqiao* in Cochinchina was based on the assumption that a class of Vietnamese entrepreneurs and merchants who could take on some of the fundamental functions of a developing colonial economy, did not exist; but at the beginning of the century this postulate was no longer valid. The French presence and the development of the colonial economy itself had facilitated the surge of a modern landowning aristocracy in the countryside, and of an urban bourgeoisie in the city; a process which was accelerated by World War I. In addition, in the early '20's, "a new generation of Vietnamese élite, channelled through the French-Vietnamese educational system, was being formed"<sup>188</sup>. For this emerging group, the monopoly the *Huaqiao* held on some sectors of the colonial economy, much more than the spread of French capitalism, was a hindrance. However, the situation became potentially explosive only with the birth and development of a Vietnamese national consciousness.

The premises for a bitter conflict between Chinese and Vietnamese existed long before the French conquest – starting with the first Han invaders, the Vietnamese had fought Chinese domination for over ten centuries. The signs of an eventual open conflict were everywhere, in the historical memory, in the successive waves of immigrants which followed the arrival of the first Ming exiles at the end of the xvth century, in their tenaciousness and industry which had given them control over the economic

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<sup>188</sup> W. J. Duiker, *The Rise of Nationalism in Vietnam, 1900–1941*, p. 109.

wealth in Cochinchina, and in their incapacity to integrate with the local population despite their social and cultural affinities. None of this had changed with the French arrival, but the Chinese had become more numerous, more encumbering, and wealthier. In his *Souvenirs*, Paul Doumer gives a brief, but penetrating description of the resentment existing between the two communities<sup>189</sup>. For futile motives, this sourness exploded into violent, albeit circumscribed, episodes of which traces are occasionally found in French colonial archives<sup>190</sup>; at times, it erupted into riots like the one which shook up Saigon on August 30 and 31, 1886, described minutely in the police reports<sup>191</sup>.

For many years, Vietnamese aversion for the invading Chinese presence did not find a political outlet. The scholar-gentry class which could have voiced their discontent was too closely linked to traditional values – their contempt for trading activities, for instance – to see the *Huaqiao* as a menace. But between 1906 and 1907, open attacks against Chinese supremacy in the Cochinchinese economy began to appear in *quoc-ngu* and French newspapers published in Saigon by a small group of entrepreneur patriots (the most renowned was Gilbert Chieu) who coalesced around the anti-French resistance movement for national rebirth headed by Phan Boi Chau<sup>192</sup>. The same idea was expressed with increasing fervor in the *Tribune Indigène* and in the *Echo annamite* which since 1917, heralded the views of the moderate, reformist, and pro-French intellectuals; and it was taken up again by the Constitutionalist Party in the 1920s.<sup>193</sup>

The development of a modern national consciousness among the Vietnamese modified the collaboration system started by the French in 1862. This system implied a strict division of the roles assumed by Chinese and Vietnamese, a differentiation the French theorized at times, and opportunely accepted at others. But, when the emerging Vietnamese groups and the national movement which defended their interests began to reject this arrangement, the French were forced to modify their attitude. In the past, because of the fierce competition of the *Huaqiao* with the middle and lower strata of the French business community, in some colonial

<sup>189</sup> Paul Doumer, *L'Indochine française: souvenirs* (Paris, 1905), pp. 67–69.

<sup>190</sup> AOM (Aix) A/D (Police des lieux publiques): 10050, the French resident at Pnompenh to Governor of Cochinchina Charles Thomson, Jan. 6, 1885. See also AOM (Aix) A/D: 13544.

<sup>191</sup> AOM (Aix) GG/D: 9025, police report of Sept. 1, 1888. See also the letter of Gaillard, Mayor of Cholon, to Governor General Richaud, Sept. 1, 1888 and the report of Saigon Attorney to General Attorney, Sept. 7, 1888. AOM (Aix) GG/D: 21544.

<sup>192</sup> W. J. Duiker, *The Rise of Nationalism*, pp. 47–49.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 128–136.

circles, anti-Chinese feelings were justified by the need to protect the Vietnamese from the undue appropriation of their wealth. And, now, these arguments which had hardly ever been espoused by the official mind, began to appear more credible, better-defined conceptually and with greater political force<sup>194</sup>. Collaboration between the French and the Vietnamese, as an alternative to the original system of collaboration, began to be considered – for political reasons or, more unlikely, out of a sense of *noblesse oblige* – as the only possible solution. If in the 1920s and 30s and even later, this radical alternative was not seen as immediate, it was for two main reasons: the slow and contradictory development of Vietnamese bourgeoisie after the thrust of the first two decades and the constant but gradual decline of the Chinese positions within the colonial economy – a downfall from which the French capitalists, who had become better organized, and enjoyed adequate protection, drew greater advantage than the incipient and fragile Vietnamese capitalists. All this retarded the transformation process, with the result that, although weaker, the Chinese business community was still rich and influent when, after the 1954 Geneva agreements, the French were forced to relinquish the control of Vietnam to Ho Chi Minh in the North and to the Americans in the South. However, there is no doubt that the collaboration system within which the Chinese community had prospered was slackening and would have been modified even if the dramatic events which put the Vietnamese nationalists in power had not befallen. It is clear that whatever the turn of events had been, the *Huaqiao* would have found themselves in an increasingly difficult situation, their power was bound to decrease and consequently, their chances of affirming their national rights.

Even if the time and the way in which this happened had not been pre-established, the impact of Vietnamese nationalism was bound to shatter the French colonial regime's authoritarian structure. But Vietnamese independence and prosperity did not coincide with the *Huaqiao*'s freedom and material well-being. This was, in fact, their tragic destiny. Condemned to live away from their homeland and devoid of protection because of the century-old crises of Chinese power, they could only live and prosper under the aegis of a régime which granted them no political rights and against which they incessantly fought to defend their national dignity. As paradoxical as this may seem, since the results were meager and transient, the time when their battle was being fought at the beginning of the century was a happy season from a political point of view, holding the promise of a better future which never came.

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<sup>194</sup> P. Boudet – G. Coulet, "Les Chinois en Indochine", *Extrême Asie (Revue Indochinoise illustrée)*, n.s., no. 35 (May, 1929), pp. 458 ff.