

## The Heaven and Earth Society Upsurge in Early 1880s

### French Cochinchina

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#### Abstract:

In early 1880s Cochinchina, Heaven and Earth Society factional rivalry suddenly erupted into two years of unrest, in Sóc Trăng Province especially. What was this upheaval about? Using previously unpublished archival materials, this article argues that the trigger for this upheaval was the early 1880 decision to replace the opium revenue farm with a government monopoly on opium from January 1882. It analyses what the archives show and suggest about the Tiandihui in Cochinchina and about its likely links with important Chinese businessmen like Ban Hap, the Tan Keng brothers, Wang Tai, and others. The article concludes that these men (or others like them) instigated this unique upsurge in secret society violence as an attempt to win control of the Sóc Trăng area, a known outlaw haven with a large Chinese population, as a base for large-scale opium smuggling after the revenue farm was abolished.

#### Keywords:

Heaven and Earth Society; Chinese secret societies; French Cochinchina; Sóc Trăng; Ban Hap; Tan Keng Sing brothers; Wang Tai; Chinese business history

#### Introduction

In mid-1880 the French administrator of Sóc Trăng Province<sup>1</sup> in western Cochinchina began reporting a worrying rise in local activity, in recruitment especially, by a Chinese secret society called the Heaven and Earth Society (Tiandihui, or Thiên Địa Hội in Vietnamese). The French had first heard of this unauthorised association in 1869,<sup>2</sup> and in 1875 the Interior Director had put his officials on guard against the group which he characterised as having “no other goal but disorder and stealing”.<sup>3</sup> Matters escalated in 1880–81, and it became increasingly difficult to maintain public order as brawls erupted involving up to 400 Chinese, mainly Teochiu speakers, who were usually armed with batons and knives but on one occasion with a revolver.<sup>4</sup> More worrying, the Thiên Địa Hội was openly recruiting not only Vietnamese but the Sino-Vietnamese and Sino-Khmer “who form[ed] the core of the [Sóc Trăng] population”.<sup>5</sup> Whole villages were being enrolled; even local Khmer were joining.

By 1882, the situation posed a visible challenge to colonial authority.<sup>6</sup> In May, Governor Le Myre de Vilers authorised extraordinary administrative measures, including very large collective fines on the officially-organised Teochiu associations (*bang*, or

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1. Personal names mentioned in archival sources are spelt as they appear in the documents but modern Vietnamese spelling conventions are used for places. “Tiandihui” and “Thiên Địa Hội” are used interchangeably for the Heaven and Earth Society in Vietnam. I am very grateful to Mary Somers Heidhues for her helpful comments; and to the Centre for the Study of the Chinese Southern Diaspora at the Australian National University for financial aid towards my research in Vietnam.

2. Circular of 23 March 1869, Vietnam National Archives No. 2 (Ho Chi Minh City), Gouvernement de la Cochinchine [Goucoch], 1A.22/044.

3. Circular of 9 Feb 1875, *Ibid*.

4. Monthly reports, Soctrang, *Ibid*.

5. Director of the Interior [DirInt] to the governor [GovCC], undated draft, early Jan 1881, *Ibid*.

6. DirInt to GovCC, draft report, May 1882, *Ibid*.

*congrégations*) in Sóc Trăng and elsewhere, since nearly all arrested rioters were Teochiu. In June he travelled to Sóc Trăng to assess matters personally. Exemplary punitive measures swiftly followed, including official sequestration of the property of certain unlucky Chinese affiliates. Within a short time, the agitation collapsed. For several years after, piracy and banditry so dwindled in Sóc Trăng that, in 1886, a new administrator proclaimed that the “famous Society of Heaven and Earth, whose importance people [had] very much exaggerated, no longer exists [here] except as a society of mutual assistance”.<sup>7</sup>

So, what had happened in Sóc Trăng in the early 1880s? Few historians have considered this question: the events there pale in comparison to similar episodes of Chinese rioting elsewhere, including in island Southeast Asia where secret societies might mobilise thousands of supporters on either side.<sup>8</sup> To my present knowledge, only two other researchers have discussed this highly unusual, even unique, upsurge. In 1978 Nguyễn Thế Anh published a short article about secret society activity in 1882–83 that anchored these events firmly in the politics of the time, when the 1882 Rivière expedition had invaded Tongking, ostensibly to fight the Chinese Black Flags, and when the Huế court was making some last, ineffectual attempts to stimulate anti-French activity in Cochinchina.<sup>9</sup> More recently, Thomas Engelbert has also touched on them, as part of a longer discussion of illicit activities in western Cochinchina from the later nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries.<sup>10</sup> Both analyses rest on primary materials derived exclusively from colonial archives housed in France.

My research in Vietnam’s National Archives Number Two, however, throws a rather different light on what was happening in early 1880s Sóc Trăng. Based on that new material, this article will argue that the unrest in Sóc Trăng was not politically motivated or even essentially local, but was driven primarily by the economic calculations of men from outside the province. What moved these powerful if shadowy figures to sponsor this violence was the colonial administration’s decision to replace the opium revenue farm—the biggest single business in Cochinchina and one in which a large syndicate of prominent Hokkien and Cantonese businessmen were shareholders—with a government monopoly (*régie*) on the processing and sale of opium. Throughout the 1870s, government finances had been largely dependent upon this revenue farm, by that time routinely managed by the Ban Hap Company; but the relationship had soured in the mid-1870s when the administration had been forced to rescue the company from its own improvident behaviour. Record profits had followed after its management was confided to the French businessman Andrew Spooner, but the administration’s subsequent decision to auction the farm again saw it return to Chinese hands. When the Ban Hap syndicate reduced its bid for the 1880 monopoly, longstanding French anti-revenue farm feelings erupted. In early February that year, the newly created Colonial Council exercised its powers over taxation and unanimously voted for a state monopoly on opium. This vote inaugurated a twenty-three month transition period that ended when the new *régie* opened its doors in January 1882. This article argues that the Tiandihui upsurge, which occurred while this major overhaul of the colonial fiscal system was underway, is best understood as a battle among Chinese business interests over lucrative future opium smuggling and sales opportunities in Sóc

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7. “Rapport sur la situation générale de l’Arrondissement de Soctrang, 1886,” Goucoch, 1A.15/155 (1–37).

8. For a recent analysis of several such events and their secret society connections, see Yeetuan Wong, “The Rise and Fall of the Big Five of Penang and their Regional Networks, 1800s–1900s” (Ph. D. thesis, ANU, 2007), ch. 3.

9. Nguyễn Thế Anh, “Secret Societies: Some Reflections on the Court of Hue and the Government of Cochinchina on the Eve of Tu-Duc’s Death (1882–1884),” *Asian Affairs* 9 (1978): 179–85. Thanks to Tracy Barrett for drawing it to my attention.

10. Thomas Engelbert, “‘Go West’ in Cochinchina. Chinese and Vietnamese Illicit Activities in the Transbassac (c. 1860–1920s),” *Chinese Southern Diaspora Studies* 1 (2007): 73–75, available online at: [http://csds.anu.edu.au/volume\\_1\\_2007/Engelbert.pdf](http://csds.anu.edu.au/volume_1_2007/Engelbert.pdf)

Trảng, a large Chinese enclave that abutted the well known smugglers' haven of Cà Mau peninsula.

Before exploring these connections, however, I want to set nineteenth-century Chinese in far southern Vietnam into their historical context, both before and after the region became the colony of French Cochinchina.

### Chinese in Southern Vietnam: 1680s to 1850s

When the Franco–Spanish expeditionary force invaded southern Vietnam in 1859, Chinese had been living in the far southern area known as the Six Provinces (Lục Tỉnh) or Nam Kỳ (southern administrative region) for about 200 years. The first recorded arrivals, early 1680s Cantonese-speaking refugees fleeing the final Qing takeover of southern China, had moved into a predominantly Khmer area and helped develop it agriculturally and commercially. Because they retained Ming dynasty costumes and hairstyles, Vietnamese called them Ming loyalists (*Ming Hương*).<sup>11</sup> Some were pirates before their arrival, and continued to be afterwards. The first recorded fleet of Ming refugees in 1682 is a case in point:<sup>12</sup> its blood-soaked passage can be tracked through eyewitness accounts describing its men as they pillaged their way from central Vietnam to the Mekong Delta and thence upriver to the Cambodia capital, whose destruction at their hands triggered four years of warfare in the region.<sup>13</sup> So feared were these Chinese newcomers at the time that even King Narai in Siam took precautions against them.<sup>14</sup> After one of their leaders, Yang Yandi, was assassinated by a lieutenant in 1688, his men came under the control of another Cantonese leader, Chen Shangshuan. Although he was technically an ally of the Nguyễn, scattered Japanese reports named Chen as a leading figure in Mekong River piracy as well.<sup>15</sup> An understandable desire to keep a closer eye on such doubtful allies may partly have prompted the Nguyễn in the late 1680s or early 1690s to garrison the Bà Rịa area just north of the Mekong Delta. Certainly in 1698, when Vietnamese rule was officially extended to the Gia Định region, Chinese settlements in Biên Hòa and Mỹ Thợ were specifically included.<sup>16</sup>

A century later, local Chinese once more became major players in an era of regional upheaval. In the early 1770s, disgruntled Chinese settlers in central Vietnam joined the infant Tây Sơn rebellion (1772–1802), initially forming the revolt's most successful military contingent. An internal dispute later saw them switch sides to back a Tây Sơn rival in the far south. They based themselves in the settled area that would later become Chợ Lớn, from where they attacked the Tây Sơn. Years later, in 1786, vengeful Tây Sơn forces massacred many thousands of Chinese here, in an ultimately self-defeating act that swung Chinese support firmly behind the Tây Sơn's arch enemy, a descendant of the former

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11. See Trịnh Hoài Đức, *Gia Định Thành Thông Chí* [Gazeteer of Gia Định], ed. and trans. Lý Việt Dũng et al (HCM City: Tổng Hợp Đồng Nai, 2005), pp. 110–11 for the original of what appeared in the nineteenth-century dynastic chronicle for this era, the *Đại Nam Thực Lục Tiền Biên*, trans. Nguyễn Ngọc Tinh (Hanoi: Sử Học, 1962), p. 125 [hereafter *Tiền Biên*].

12. Vietnamese primary sources wrongly date this fleet to 1679 but Yang Yandi, whom they identify as one of the main leaders of this first émigré fleet to seek asylum in Nguyễn Vietnam, was actively engaged in piracy in the Tongking Gulf until early 1682, according to contemporaneous Chinese sources. See Niu Junkai and Li Qingxin, "Chinese 'Political Pirates' in the Seventeenth-Century Tongking Gulf," in *The Tongking Gulf through History*, ed. Nola Cooke, Li Tana, and James A. Anderson (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, forthcoming 2011), ch 9.

13. Full references for these events can be found in Nola Cooke, "Later-seventeenth-century Cham–Viet interactions: New light from French missionary sources," *Việt Học Niên San/Annalen der Hamburger Vietnamistik*, 4–5 (2010): 13–52.

14. Mak Phœun, *Histoire du Cambodge de la fin de XVIe siècle au début du XVIIIe* (Paris: EFEO, 1996), p. 374.

15. See reports from 1690 and 1699 in Yumio Sakurai, "Eighteenth-Century Chinese Pioneers on the Water Frontier of Indochina", in *Water Frontier. Commerce and the Chinese in the Lower Mekong Region (1750–1880)*, ed. Nola Cooke and Li Tana (Boulder: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004), pp. 40–41.

16. *Tiền Biên*, pp. 148, 153–54.

Nguyễn rulers called Nguyễn Phúc Ánh. This last switch finally put them on the winning side; Phúc Ánh would take the throne in 1802 as King Gia Long. Minh Hương and Chinese residents who had survived the 1786 massacre flourished thereafter. They were integral to Nguyễn Ánh's success, whether as soldiers, merchants, agriculturalists, or literate administrative officials, and in the first decades of the nineteenth century they formed a significant presence in southern regional government, society, and commerce, as Choi Byong Wook has amply demonstrated.<sup>17</sup>

By the 1820s, immigration from southern China to southern Vietnam was in full swing, with thousands of newcomers arriving annually.<sup>18</sup> Among them undoubtedly were sworn brothers belonging to an important secret society that had originated as a 1760s Guangxi mutual aid organisation, the Tiandihui or Heaven and Earth Society.<sup>19</sup> Late eighteenth-century Qing repression of the *hui* had by then spread similarly-organised brotherhoods throughout Quangdong and Fujian, the provinces of origin of the newcomers—called *Thanh Nhân* (“Qing people”) locally, to distinguish them from the partly-assimilated Minh Hương of mixed Chinese and Vietnamese parentage. On arrival, Thanh Nhân were required to join dialect-based organisations (called *bang*) that Gia Long had ordained as the official intermediaries between resident Qing Chinese and the Nguyễn administration (an arrangement the French would later adopt and develop under the name of *congrégation*).

Tiandihui groups no doubt existed within the various *bang*, very likely among the employees of the most important merchants and perhaps among the agricultural pioneers in Sóc Tráng. If so, the *hui* may have played a key role in the issue that would set the local Chinese on a fatal collision course with the second Nguyễn king, Minh Mạng—the illicit export of southern rice and the smuggling of opium.<sup>20</sup> Two areas outside Chợ Lớn whose topography and location on Chinese junk routes most lent them to such activities both contained long-settled Chinese communities by the early nineteenth century. To the southeast was the huge southern frontier region of modern Sóc Tráng–Cà Mau, with its network of old Teochiu farming and fishing villages along its myriad internal waterways. Since at least the later eighteenth century, Chinese junks trading to Southeast Asian ports had regularly navigated through this region (generally called Ba Xuyên) as it afforded well-supplied, safe short cuts that avoided the dangerous currents of the Cà Mau peninsula.<sup>21</sup> Still largely Chinese and Khmer territory by the 1830s, Ba Xuyên (modern Sóc Trăng and Bạc Liêu) had so few Vietnamese settlers that the area was not even included in the first

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17. Choi Byong Wook, *Southern Vietnam*, esp. pp. 35–41, 69–80; and idem, “The Nguyen Dynasty’s Policy toward Chinese on the Water Frontier in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century,” in *Water Frontier*, pp. 85–99.

18. In 1826 alone, for instance, 3,000 Chinese disembarked here [see Choi, *Southern Vietnam*, p. 72], while a French missionary reported 500 arrived in 1830 on the same junk with him. Joseph Marchand to his parents, 22 Feb 1830, Archives of the Missions-Étrangères de Paris, vol. 1251, folio 29.

19. David Ownby, *Brotherhoods and Secret Societies in Early and Mid-Qing China: The Formation of a Tradition* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1996), ch 3, 5. Also see Dian H. Murray, *The Origins of the Tiandihui: The Chinese Triads in Legend and History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994). Its presence is documented much earlier in other parts of Southeast Asia. The Ghee Hin, a Tiandihui brotherhood, existed in Penang from about 1790, in Malacca from 1818, and in Singapore from at least 1825. Mak Lau Fong, *The Sociology of Secret Societies* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 95.

20. For the smuggling issue, see Choi, *Southern Vietnam*, pp. 70–77. This possibility was probably hidden from the authors of Choi’s Vietnamese sources.

21. For Chinese settlers in the southeast, see Nola Cooke, “Water World: Chinese and Vietnamese on the Riverine Water Frontier, from Ca Mau to Tonle Sap (c. 1850–1884),” in *Water Frontier*, pp. 142–46; for eighteenth-century Teochiu villages in modern Bạc Liêu, see Huỳnh Minh, *Bạc Liêu xưa và nay* [Bạc Liêu in former times and today] (?), Calif: Bach Viet, 1994), p. 11. French missionary documents confirm quite a large Chinese population in junk trading ports like Bathac, where sugar and rice were sold. See journal of Levavasseur, 22 Ap 1768, in *Histoire de la Mission de la Cochinchine. Documents historiques (1728–1771)*, vol. 2, ed. Adrien Launay, reprint (Paris: Les Indes savantes, 2000), pp. 387–88.

southern cadastral survey in 1836.<sup>22</sup> Then to the west, stretching along the coast from modern Rạch Giá to Hà Tiên and Kampot, was another untamed area, with longstanding Chinese residents and connections and with direct links to Singapore.<sup>23</sup> Geographically and demographically, both areas were ideal for Chinese (and other) smuggling.

Although Choi has argued persuasively for considerable Vietnamese involvement in both illicit rice exporting and opium smuggling, in the late 1820s Minh Mạng blamed these activities exclusively on Gia Định Chinese. He also believed that many outside the Teochui agricultural areas were engaged in large-scale tax evasion. When most Thanh Nhân immigrants arrived, they were rated as too poor to pay tax; but afterwards, with so many hidden from official view within their *bang*, the administration had no way of knowing whether their circumstances had improved enough for them to be eligible to contribute. By the early 1830s, the court was determined to end opportunities for such malfeasance and to curb Chinese economic power. Huế sought to achieve both goals by an administrative overhaul designed to replace the existing decentralised regional government in the south with centralised bureaucratic rule. The provocative way in which this regime change was imposed, however, triggered a widespread southern revolt (1833–35). Willingly or not, it swept up many thousands of local Chinese, whether as combatants, refugees, or victims of harsh official repression.<sup>24</sup> A watershed event in Chinese history here, the mid-1830s catastrophe forced many Chinese survivors to flee,<sup>25</sup> or to lead far more circumspect lives if they remained, as Huế followed repression with a determined policy of southern Vietnamisation. This included the forced assimilation of local peoples, among them Thanh Nhân Chinese, whose commercial activities were then further circumscribed by a ban on their direct participation in the rice trade or in maritime commerce based in Vietnam. In 1842, Huế's integrationist goals caused the court to rule that any male children of resident Qing subjects must, as adults, enrol in the Ming Hương association rather than in their father's dialect-based *bang*, a move designed to make the *bang* increasingly irrelevant for the locally-born offspring of Chinese settlers.<sup>26</sup> This push towards Chinese assimilation persisted right up until the arrival of the French, with one observer reporting in 1861 that resident Chinese who married Vietnamese women became "Annamite subjects and [could] no longer leave the country", just like the ordinary populace.<sup>27</sup>

By the mid-century, coastal southern Chinese were undoubtedly aware of these policies and seemingly tended to avoid settling in Vietnam as a consequence. In the 1850s, 10,000 to 20,000 Fujianese refugees fleeing the Taiping Rebellion landed annually in Singapore, where they would displace Teochiu as the dominant linguistic group by 1860.<sup>28</sup> By contrast, Nam Kỳ apparently retained little of its 1820s allure for Mainland emigrants, so

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22. Nguyễn Đình Đầu, *Nghiên Cứu Địa Bạ Triều Nguyễn, An Giang* [Researching the Nguyễn court land registers, An Giang] (Ho Chi Minh City: Thanh Pho HCM, 1995), p. 81. In 1868, 75 from 140 communes here were Khmer. Philippe Langlet and Quach Thanh Tam, *Atlas historique des six provinces du sud du Vietnam* (Paris: Les Indes savants, 2001), p. 242.

23. For this region, see Engelbert, "Go West": 67–70.

24. For the period generally, see Choi, *Southern Vietnam*, ch 2 and 3. For Chinese involvement in the revolt, see pp. 95–98. Over 1,000 Chinese in Chợ Lớn alone were either killed or arrested and had their property confiscated by the state.

25. Numbers of those who had fled upriver to Cambodia fought Nguyễn forces again, joining the widespread Khmer anti-Vietnamese uprising of the early 1840s. Choi, "Nguyen Dynasty Policy toward Chinese," p. 96.

26. Choi, *Southern Vietnam*, pp. 146–47.

27. Lt. Rieunier, "Aperçu sur la Basse-Cochinchine," *Revue maritime et coloniale* 1 (1861): 186. Nevertheless, such Chinese men were common in villages with markets, and often acted as intermediaries between local producers and Chinese commercial houses in Saigon–Chợ Lớn.

28. Carl A. Trocki, "The Rise and Fall of the Ngee Heng Kongsi in Singapore", in "Secret Societies" Reconsidered. *Perspectives on the Social History of Modern South China and Southeast Asia*, ed. David Ownby and Mary Somers Heidhues (London: M. E. Sharpe, 1993), p. 104.

that its total resident Chinese population at this time was probably well below 30,000.<sup>29</sup> Given their compatriots' experiences in the last few decades here, it is no surprise that many local Thanh Nhân cautiously welcomed the French take-over of eastern Cochinchina in 1862, which was completed in 1867 when the remaining three western provinces were taken by force.

### Chinese and the Early Colonial System

French colonial rule saw all their earlier commercial rights returned to Qing settlers and sojourners in Cochinchina, and the novice French naval administration had high hopes that the productive capacity of Chinese labour and capital would kick-start local economic and commercial development.<sup>30</sup> It was not long, however, before experience revealed that administering a Chinese population could be problematic. As Lucien de Grammont cautioned:<sup>31</sup>

The Chinese who live here, restless and very bustling [... are] almost all single men [who] come and go without cease, as their business demands, smoke opium, gamble frenetically, and engage in daily brawling.... [They] form an agitated, turbulent mass, requiring an energetic government and strict regulation.

The fledgling naval administration had initially seen no need of special regulations for Chinese, but in mid-1862 it began to assemble a regulatory regime designed to govern Chinese public life and relations with the colonial state. Administrative orders of 11 and 12 August 1862 mandated, among other things, the purchase of compulsory annual residency permits and named Saigon as the only legitimate entry point for Chinese.<sup>32</sup> Two more orders followed, on 4 February<sup>33</sup> and 1 November 1863.<sup>34</sup> Taken together, they essentially set up a colonial version of the Nguyễn *bang* system. By 1864, all but a handful of Chinese (servants of Europeans or men with valid labour contracts) were only legally able to enter the colony after being formally accepted into an officially-recognised dialect association (congregation), which accepted collective responsibility for its members' activities. Its elected headmen became subordinate colonial officials, required personally to assess every male immigrant on arrival and to list those whom they accepted on a register that was supposed to contain regularly updated information on all members' whereabouts. The November 1863 order completed the system with two fiscal measures: a special capitation

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29. In 1868, the first colonial census found only 22,673 Chinese after several years of relatively open immigration policies. Langlet and Quach, *Atlas historique*, p. 202.

30. See, for instance, Admiral La Grandière's 1863 rosy hopes for local economic development following Chinese settlement, cited in Etienne Denis, *Bordeaux et la Cochinchine, sous la restauration et le second empire* (S-I, Impr. Delmas, 1966), p.194, or the equally high opinion of Chinese enterprise in pre-colonial Cochinchina held by one of his senior officials, Paulin Vial, in *Les Premières années de la Cochinchine, colonie française* (Paris: Challamel aîné, 1874), vol. 1, pp. 351, 354–55.

31. Lucien de Grammont, *Onze mois de sous-préfecture en Basse-Cochinchine* (n. pub., 1863), p. 104. By 1862 he reckoned Chợ Lớn had recovered almost all its prosperity, adding: "A great number of Chinese have amassed considerable personal fortunes there; others, agents for the big commercial houses of Hong Kong, Canton or Singapore, make loans to, or sub-commission for, the European merchant shipping that finds good profits in commerce there." (p. 103).

32. *Bulletin officiel de la Cochinchine française* (1862-63): 209–10 (henceforth *BOCF*).

33. *Ibid*: 286–87. The order of 12 August is not printed in the *Bulletin* but later documents refer to it.

34. *Ibid*: 402–04. Also see Jean Bouchot, *Documents pour servir à l'Histoire de Saigon, 1859–1865* (Saigon: Albert Portail, 1927), pp. 391–93.

tax for Chinese,<sup>35</sup> and an annual business licence assessed according to the value of one's enterprise.<sup>36</sup> Stiff penalties applied for all infractions.

Despite certain later orders tinkering with details—like that of 30 November 1870 which deemed any foreign Asians without residency permits “vagabonds endangering public security” who could be gaoled and expelled without reference to the courts,<sup>37</sup> or the order of 5 October 1871 which replaced residency permits with identity documents (*livret*) bearing photographs<sup>38</sup>—the early 1860s *arrêtés* had established the basic framework which the French hoped would provide the “strict regulation” of local Chinese that Lucien de Grammont had advised. When the union of Indochina was created in 1887, the Cochinchinese system of control was subsequently extended to all parts of the colony.



Figure1. The Original Cholon Inspectorate

Source: Jean Bouchot, *Documents pour servir à l'Histoire de Saigon, 1859 à 1865* (Saigon: Ed. Albert Portail, 1927), p. 352

Yet, as Minh Mạng had discovered in the late 1820s, it was one thing to weave a net of regulations around the Chinese but another to make it effective in reality. Almost immediately it became obvious that Chinese indifference or hostility towards such colonial

35. Initially at a flat rate of 2 piastres per head, it was later subdivided into three payment levels.

36. In 1864, only 19 Chinese held these licences: 8 in the 1st class (paying 50 piastres); 4 in the 2nd class (paying 25 piastres), and 7 in the 3rd class (paying 10 piastres). See Vial's letter of 15 July 1864 in Bouchot, *Documents pour servir à l'Histoire*, p. 211 for the number of men and the order of 1 Nov 1863 for the amounts (p. 392).

37. *BOCF* (1870): 327. As early as 1864 the administration had expelled a number of Chinese and Vietnamese vagabonds whom villages would not accept [see *Ibid.*, p. 210]. The 1870 order meant that any foreign Asian who did not belong to a congregation, and thus lacked authorisation to be in the colony, could be automatically ejected. The sole relevant extant archival dossier for this period, covering 1868–69, details 7 Chinese and 1 Indian expelled under that rubric. One other expelled Chinese had been denounced as a long-term bandit by the Chợ Lớn Hakka congregation head, whom he had been threatening. See Goucoch 1A.22/042 (4).

38. Decision on the introduction of foreign workers into the colony, general and special policing measures, 5 Oct 1871, *BOCF* (1871): 321–30. Men in the 1st tax category, by definition land owners paying more than 300 francs per year in land tax or holding business licences in the 1st and 2nd categories, were allowed to carry passports instead of the *livret* that was required of all other Chinese.

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administrative measures might erode their implementation. Some Saigon Chinese ignored the residency permit rules almost from the start,<sup>39</sup> then in 1869 and 1870 the administration discovered large numbers of Chinese were living in recently conquered Sóc Trăng and Hà Tiên with no permits, and were thus eluding the capitation tax. The governor offered bounties for every offender whom congregation chiefs brought to district offices,<sup>40</sup> but in Sóc Trăng the incentive was largely ineffectual. In 1868 a French survey had found 5,426 Chinese there;<sup>41</sup> in 1880 Inspector de Sainteny could only discover a derisory 2,681 because “in almost all villages the Chinese disobeyed the notables’ orders and did not appear” for the head count, he complained.<sup>42</sup> This result should be compared to the total number on Teochiu congregation rolls there in early 1881: when collective fines were levied in January that year, the eight congregations reportedly had 6,090 men on their lists.<sup>43</sup> A year later, in April 1882, the arrest of thirty-one Teochiu Tiandihui brawlers provided a worrying reminder of how large the invisible Chinese population here might still be: eight of the men arrested, or 25 percent, had no identity documents.<sup>44</sup> But even those with valid identity papers often failed to get the obligatory *laissez-passer* before travelling internally: in 1884, for instance, Inspector Brière in Chợ Lớn had to request a small detachment of soldiers to help escort the Chinese being arrested each day without such travel documents because their number was “too high” for him to manage.<sup>45</sup>

Part of the problem in these early years, before more effective systems of control were put in place, was that the regime was inherently flawed. A system whose success required unpaid congregation leaders<sup>46</sup> to act as colonial watchdogs was unlikely to achieve its objectives at the time. Congregation heads were often quite important, or at least well-established, members of their communities who had been elected to defend their compatriots’ interests rather than to police them on behalf of a foreign state.<sup>47</sup> The practical operation of the early system could also undermine intended colonial outcomes. The requirement for annual elections, for instance, fostered an attitude that discouraged incumbents from worrying overmuch about onerous duties like the proper maintenance of residency and tax rolls, since mistakes would rarely be detected before someone else took over.<sup>48</sup> Factors like these ensured a “considerable” gap existed between Chinese numbers on immigration registers and on capitation tax rolls,<sup>49</sup> to the continuing irritation of French officials. Congregations rarely owned property, so the lost taxes could not be recovered from them; yet the administration hesitated to demand payment from individual congregation heads, despite an administrative order of 1874 empowering it to do so.<sup>50</sup> A

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39. Decision of 29 Dec 1864, on more rigorous surveillance of Chinese in Saigon town, *BOCF* (1864): 169.

40. For Sóc Trăng, *BOCF* (1869): 322–23, and for Hà Tiên, *BOCF* (1870): 78–79.

41. Langlet and Quach, *Atlas historique*, p. 242. The total number of Chinese in Cochinchina was calculated as 22,673 but this seems too low. For general population data from archival sources, see Table 1 below.

42. De Sainteny, “Inspection de Soctrang. Rapport sur les voies de communication”, 20 Aug 1880. The consolidated table gave only 2,567 Chinese, so I have used the higher figure in the text. Goucoch, 1A.15/2218.

43. My total of rounded figures given in an administrative investigation dated 28 Dec 1880, Goucoch, 1A.22/044.

44. List of Chinese arrested after the brawl of 25 April 1882, in *ibid*.

45. Note of 5 Dec 1884, Goucoch, 1B.33/094. This was unusual, with the normal unregistered component in arrested groups unlikely to top 10%.

46. It was not until 1873 that serving congregation heads were even exempted from capitation tax. Goucoch, CP 8024 (3).

47. Congregation heads also formed the *Kong so*, a Chinese tribunal that officially adjudicated internal matters including commercial disputes between Chinese, if requested [*BOCF* (1862–63): 403]. In the late 1860s, the main Chợ Lớn businessmen sought changes to this arrangement, according to the Chợ Lớn monthly report of Sept 1868. See Goucoch, 1A.2/016 (1). The council met at a religious site called Sept Pagodes, built for the seven congregations of the 1860s (which were later reduced to five).

48. Chợ Lớn administrator Forestière to DirInt, 26 June 1888, Goucoch 1A.16/184.

49. *Ibid*.

50. See the letter of 17 Nov 1880 from the Treasurer to DirInt, and DirInt’s report to GovCC dated 23 Nov 1880 which described the “great indulgence” he believed the administration had shown towards the collection of capitation tax, Goucoch 1A.9/053(2)

collective failure to pursue such infractions in practice meant, by the late 1880s, that the 1874 law had largely fallen into disuse.

Congregation heads might also passively resist unpopular measures more openly. For example, Chợ Lớn Teochiu congregation leaders never put up notices asking members to comply with the hated 1871 decision requiring photographs on identity papers, something “a great number” of Chinese rejected.<sup>51</sup> In other cases, they might actively intervene to thwart French plans: in 1893, for instance, congregation leaders helped repatriate nine Chinese accused of belonging to a criminal gang while their case was under active investigation.<sup>52</sup> Where members of secret societies were concerned, archival cases suggest congregation leaders often only voluntarily denounced men who threatened them personally or used excessive violence within the Chinese community.<sup>53</sup> More often they needed to be summonsed to an official’s bureau and questioned individually before they would divulge information about such people.

In November 1874 a special office of Asian immigration was finally established, to better control Chinese movements in and out of the colony, and in 1876 its function was transferred to the powerful Interior Department, at the heart of government.<sup>54</sup> Nevertheless, the monitoring of Chinese internal movements remained difficult,<sup>55</sup> as was ensuring suspect or vagabond Chinese did not freely move unseen into or out of Cochinchina, either via established smuggling networks along the Cà Mau, Sóc Trăng, Rạch Giá, and Hà Tiên coastline, with its many unpatrolled waterways and multiple access points to the sea,<sup>56</sup> or by the simple but highly effective expedient of using an alias for immigration purposes.<sup>57</sup>

Despite stiff penalties for infringing immigration, identity, residence, or internal travel regulations, the archival materials viewed to date suggest the naval administration (1860–

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51. To the irritation of Brière who, on one day alone, had to deal with 71 Chinese found infringing the new rule. [Chợ Lớn daily report, 9–10 January 1872, Goucoch 1B.29/309] In 1886 Granier also complained about continuing Chinese resistance to this requirement in Sóc Trăng. See “Rapport de 1 août 1886,” Goucoch 1A.15/167 (7).

52. See letter of 13 Aug 1893 from State Prosecutor Baudin to the head of the judicial service, Hanoi. Centre des Archives d’Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provence [CAOM], Gouvernement Générale de l’Indochine [GGI] 21537.

53. One rare exception occurred in 1875, when Tseun Kouï Ly, head of the Chợ Lớn Teochiu congregation, reported the activities of Tsaio Sen, head of an unnamed secret society. Founded some years before, its membership was now spreading and he requested the government to watch its members closely. [Report of Chợ Lớn administrator, 21 April 1875, Goucoch, 1A.22/044] More often congregation heads might only report secret society agents after they had left the area, or even refuse to do so when asked by a fellow Chinese who had been beaten or intimidated by such agents, as occurred in the case of Ky Ao (Ky Diep Tuy), an active recruiter for the Ngãi Hưng branch of the Thiên Địa Hội in western Cochinchina for 3 years before his arrest in December 1882. [See the police report from Chợ Lớn, 12 Dec 1882, plus 11 annexes, CAOM GGI Fonds Amiraux [FA] 11557] Others only acted after being threatened personally. This occurred with the head of the Hakka congregation who denounced Phuon Yune Phong, a former bandit chief and notoriously suspected of remaining a thief despite posing for 6 years as a trader. It was only when he tried to extort goods from the Hakka congregation head that he was denounced and expelled. See note 37 above.

54. “Exposé de la situation générale de la colonie de la Cochinchine. Année 1875,” and “Exposé de la situation générale de la colonie de la Cochinchine. Année 1876,” both at CAOM Indochine, Ancien fonds [AF] A 20 (15), c. 5.

55. In 1886, the administration decided to focus its control efforts only on men in the third tax category, whom Brière described as “an essentially mobile population, without any serious attachments in the villages [in which they were registered], who only too often escape the surveillance of the Administration”. See letter of 5 Jan 1886, Goucoch 1B.32/123 (5).

56. See Cooke, “Water World,” pp. 142–46.

57. For instance, when a Chợ Lớn police raid in March 1880 yielded the membership list of a local Ngãi Hưng branch, no names on it corresponded to immigration records. [Mayor to Dirlnt, 20 March 1880, File #24, Goucoch, 1A22/045 (1)] It was even difficult for French *colons* to establish the identity of Chinese businessmen with whom they dealt; the Chamber of Commerce even wanted the administration to provide information on them. [See its “Rapport de la Commission designé par le Chambre de Commerce (25 fevrier 1873)” on the application of French commercial law to the Chinese] The State Prosecutor refused, in an undated letter which dryly observed that the Chamber would be “astonished if the Chinese in turn asked the Administration to give them information about the ... the Europeans with whom they had dealings”. See Goucoch, IA3/166 (3), Folder A#1.

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1879) always struggled with Chinese unresponsiveness towards, or clever countermeasures against, demands they found irksome or provocative. In the 1860s and 1870s, the general impression conveyed by archival documents is that an unknown but possibly substantial number of local Chinese routinely resisted official French intrusions into their lives, whether passively or actively. Such an attitude fostered a ready acceptance of illicit manoeuvres and a sneaking disregard for the thicket of rules and regulations with which colonial authorities tried to circumscribe Chinese lives.<sup>58</sup> It was thus a perfect environment for the flourishing of Chinese secret societies, as we will see shortly. First however I want to conclude these introductory remarks by considering what all-too-imperfect colonial statistics can reveal about the composition of the Chinese community, in the 1870s especially.

### A Statistical Outline of the Early Chinese Community

As might be expected from the foregoing discussion, colonial statistics for the fluid Chinese population were at best fairly sketchy. Table 1 lists officially recorded totals at various times between 1868 and the 1886 census. Where Chinese numbers are concerned, the 1886 figures still remain estimates only, as they were based on a headcount of whoever turned out in the towns and on figures supplied by congregational leaders in other areas.

Unfortunately, few of the early records of the Immigration Office are still extant. Table 2 (over page) gives the records for Chinese entries and exits gleaned from archival sources in France.

**Table 1. Estimated Number of Chinese in French Cochinchina, 1868 to 1886**

1868	22,673 [plus 3,191 Minh Huong]
1870	43,372
1872	35,010
1873	42,022
1874	49,741
1875	39,383
1877	42,778
1879	52,418
1886	50,173

Sources:

1868, *Annuaire de la Cochinchine*, cited in Langlet and Quach, *Atlas historique des six provinces du sud*, p. 202.

1870, Indochine A 20 (11), carton 5, "Cochinchine. Rapport pour l'Exposé de la situation de l'Empire"

1872 & 1873, Indochine A 20 (14), c. 5, "Exposé général de la situation de la Cochinchine pour l'année 1873"

1874 & 1875, Indochine A 20 (15), c. 5, "Exposé général de la situation de la Cochinchine pour 1874" and

"Exposé de la situation générale de la Colonie de la Cochinchine. Année 1875".

1877, Indochine A 20 (16), c. 5, "Exposé de la situation de la Cochinchine, 1877".

1879, Indochine A 20 (17), c. 5, "Exposé général de la Cochinchine, 1879", on 1 January 1880, of whom 49,477 were adult men subject to capitation tax.

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58. In 1871, for instance, it became illegal—and punishable by up to 6 days in prison—to let animals graze or roam along roadsides and verges, to leave broken glass or pottery in internal courtyards, or to fail each morning to clean the portion of street or passageway before one's dwelling, among other new regulations. [Order of 18 Sept 1871, Goucoch, III59/N93 (37)] For the avalanche of new regulations in 1874–75 meant to control daily life in Chợ Lớn alone, see Goucoch 1A.16/166 (15).

**Table 2. Official Figures for Arrivals and Departures (by Dialect Group if Available), 1876–1878, 1889, and 1891**

	in 1873	out 1873	in 1876*	out 1876*	in 1877	out 1877	in 1879	out 1879	in 1889	out 1889	in 1891	out 1891
Fujian			733	822	2,099	313						
Cantonese			2,792	1,873	4,138	599						
Hainan			233	194	373	72						
Hakka			699	583	1,023	186						
Teochiu			1,578	925	2,485	307						
Total	9,801	6,079	6,035	4,397	10,118	1,487	13,704	5,780	13,511	10,863	11,828	8,337

\*Note: partial total for the period 1 Jan to 31 August 1876 only.

Sources:

1876, Indochine A 20 (15), c. 5, "Exposé de la situation générale de la Colonie de la Cochinchine, Année 1876"  
 1877, Indochine A 20 (16), c. 5, "Exposé de la situation de la Cochinchine, 1877"  
 1879, Indochine A 20 (17), c. 5, "Exposé général de la Cochinchine, 1879", 1 Jan 1880. Of the entries, 11,486 were newcomers and 2,218 returning residents.  
 1889, GGIC 64315, "Rapport mensuels sur les services dependant du Secrétaire general", 10 Jan 1890  
 1891, *Journal officiel*, 7 Jan 1892

As Chinese immigrants came to the colony to improve their economic lot, their numbers fluctuated significantly with changing economic conditions, as data in Table 2 indicate. The poor harvests and fragile economic conditions of 1873–76 sent numbers plummeting, just as would the two-year recession triggered by the 1889 introduction of a metropolitan tariff (instead of the previous free trade system) right after a very bad harvest in 1888.<sup>59</sup> In 1873, departures represented more than 60 percent of official entries, rising to over 70 percent in 1876. The proportion fell to about 15 percent of entries following the excellent harvest of 1877 but then immediately jumped in 1878 to over 40 percent. In the 1889–90 recession departures fell to the worst levels of the 1870s, at about 70 percent of arrivals. Of course, a considerable proportion of exits always represented temporary departures of residents: in 1879, for instance, only 975 of the 5,780 exits were non-residents. Nevertheless, comparatively slow Chinese population growth sets this period apart from the flooding immigration of the later 1890s and early twentieth century.

As the demographic statistics for Saigon in Table 3 show, as late as 1890 the vast majority of Chinese immigrants there were single, whether males over the age of fourteen or young unmarried women, most of whom no doubt serviced the men's sexual needs in local brothels (as would also have done the 20 unmarried Japanese women not included in the table). Only 188 Chinese men in Saigon were registered as married, with a little over half of them to Chinese women.

**Table 3. Population Statistics for Saigon Town, 31 December 1889**

**A. Males**

	Boys (to14)	Single (over 14)	Married	Widowers	total
French	224	665	148	7	1044
Vietnamese	1254	2472	270	4	3960
Chinese	641	2856	118	2	3617
Indians	68	352	5	-	425
Malays	31	94	-	-	125
Cambodians	2	7	1	-	10

59. See customs reports for 1889 and 1891, CAOM, Indochine L-30 (9), c. 229.

**B. Females**

	Girls (to14)	Single (over 14)	Married	Widows	total
French	154	292	150	22	618
Vietnamese	1040	2456	309	19	3822
Chinese	656	1111	58	9	1834
Indians	41	91	2	2	136
Malays	19	91	-	-	110
Cambodians	2	12	-	-	14

Source: Goucoch III 59/N 82 (20)

Reliable data on the sub-ethnic composition of the early colonial Chinese population is hard to find, although the Immigration Service did briefly report entries and exits by dialect group in the mid-1870s, as Table 2 has shown. Those figures support other accounts that suggest the big three dialect groups in the 1870s were, in descending order of importance: Cantonese, whose share of entries and exits never fell below 40 percent of movements in these months; then Teochiu, whose entries accounted for roughly 25 percent of the twenty month total but whose exits fluctuated wildly between nearly 50 percent of entries in the economically difficult year of 1876 and 12 percent of entries in the good harvest year of 1877; and Fujianese, with a steady 20-21 percent of entries and exits.

A second source for such data is the French businessman Albert Cornu. Using his own excellent private contacts with Chinese friends and business partners, he quantified dialect group numbers in Saigon–Chợ Lớn in 1879 as they appear in Table 4. Comparing his figures with the data recorded for entries and exits in the mid-1870s strongly supports other anecdotal evidence to confirm that Saigon–Chợ Lớn was very much a Cantonese stronghold demographically, and that Teochiu were more likely to be rural than urban, since they represented only 14 percent of Chinese in Saigon and Chợ Lớn but around 20 percent of entries and exits.

**Table 4. Estimated Sub-ethnic Numbers in Saigon–Chợ Lớn, 1879**

Cantonese	12,413
Fujian	5,513
Teochiu	3,895
Hakka	2,791
Hainan	863
total	27,455

Source: Albert Cornu, *De l'immigration chinoise en Cochinchine française* (Saigon: Imprimerie Nicolier, 1879), p. 21.

Moving to class, two other sorts of archival information provide a different perspective on the broader Chinese community. The first comes from an incomplete set of congregational registers for Saigon in 1873 and 1874.<sup>60</sup> These documents are poorly filled in and may in fact be copies of the proper registers, since they only mention men in the first two capitation tax categories. Nevertheless, they provide very useful information about Chinese economic life in Saigon at the time. First, the economic significance of Cantonese is confirmed: in 1873 there were 23 Cantonese in the first tax category and 20 in 1874, with 102 and 152 individuals respectively in the second tax category. Of those in the first category in 1874, 4 had first class business licences and 9 had second class licences. All these men were regarded as “notables” and so owed 300 francs in capitation tax under an

60. Unless otherwise noted, all information is from Goucoch, 1B 38/0511.

administrative order of 5 October 1871.<sup>61</sup> In comparison, for both 1873 and 1874 there were only 5 Fujianese residents of Saigon listed in the first tax category, three of them the Tan Keng brothers (to whom we return below), and 26 and 24 respectively in the second tax category. Comparing the spread of occupations among Cantonese and Fujianese in the second tax category in 1874 reveals that 16 of the 17 Fujianese for whom details exist were retailers with business licences in the third and fourth categories; by contrast, Cantonese were spread right across the commercial and industrial spectrum, with 39 of the 103 men whose professions were listed being involved in food production and retailing, from pork butchery through to cooking or inn keeping. In all, these well-off Cantonese worked in nineteen separate occupations, ranging from carpenters to tailors and cobblers, and from shopkeepers to pharmacists and laundrymen. Like the Fujianese, all Cantonese in the second tax category held third to fifth class business licences, indicating they were self-employed individuals whom the French categorised in 1871 as “registered”, and who thus paid a capitation tax of 100 francs.

In comparison to men from these two congregations, Teochiu and Hakkas barely registered in the higher tax brackets. In 1873 there was one named Teochiu man in the first tax category and none in 1874, with 8 and 6 listed in the second category. No Hakkas were listed in the first tax category in either year, although there were 25 card numbers (without details) issued for 1873 and 22 named individuals for 1874, 12 of whom held business licences in the fifth class. Finally, the Hainanese register was blank, with no names or card numbers for either year, probably reflecting their lowly economic position in Saigon rather than bureaucratic ineptitude.

The second source of useful archival data comes from taxation information. Table 5 lists the numbers of taxpayers in 1879, by category and according to their registered places of residence. Not surprisingly, it too reinforces the economic centrality of Saigon–Chợ Lớn: 55 out of 57 businessmen in the first tax category lived in these twin towns, while 344 from 432 men in the second category also resided there. Together, men in these two categories made up fewer than 2 percent of Chinese taxpayers at the time.

**Table 5. Chinese Taxpayers per District, by Tax Category, 1879**

	1 <sup>st</sup> tax category	2 <sup>nd</sup> category	3 <sup>rd</sup> category
Cholon	38	264	12,329
Saigon	17	80	9,704
Soctrang	1	16	4,413
Vinhlong	1	3	1,322
Travinh		12	2,082
Cantho		12	1,793
Sadec		8	1,551
Tayninh		8	393
Gocong		6	412
Chaudoc		5	2,497
Mytho		5	1,548
Rachgia		5	1,170
Bienhoa		2	730
Hatien		2	683
Baria		2	277
Bentre		1	900
Longxuyen		1	653
Tanan			524
Thudaumot			276
<b>[General Cochinchina total</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>432</b>	<b>43,257]</b>

Source: Indochine A 20 (17), c. 5, “Exposé général de la Cochinchine, 1879”.

61. BOCF: 329–30.

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The geographical distribution of taxpayers in Table 5 can be combined with the census information from 1886 (see Table 6) to indicate broad Chinese residential patterns in later 1870s Cochinchina, although of course neither source can illuminate the invisible floating population of non-taxpayers. The figures in Table 5 indicate that, although the majority of Chinese taxpayers had their registered residences in Saigon and Chợ Lớn (whether the towns or surrounding districts), Chinese numbers were also fairly high in the Mekong riverine districts of western and southeast Cochinchina. There were 14,997 taxpayers registered in Sóc Trăng, Vĩnh Long, Trà Vinh, Cần Thơ, Sa Đéc, Châu Đốc, Rạch Giá, Hà Tiên, Bến Tre, and Long Xuyên Provinces. Sóc Trăng claimed almost 30 percent of them, as well as the lion's share of important businessmen outside Saigon–Chợ Lớn (seventeen in the first two tax categories compared to Vĩnh Long's four). From the earlier discussion we would expect a visible Teochiu presence in the later 1870s countryside, something other sources confirm for Sóc Trăng in particular. The 1900 provincial monograph, for instance, estimated that about 70 percent of the local Chinese population there were Teochiu speakers.<sup>62</sup>

**Table 6. Population Figures, 1886 Census**

arrondissement	Europeans	Vietnamese	Cambodians	Chinese	Total
Saigon	1,354	8,986	35	6,649	17,024
Baclieu	18	41,454	8,648	2,332	52,452
Baria	50	8,801	----	316	9,167
Bentre	30	161,441	----	1,270	162,741
Bienhoa	33	61,428	----	940	62,401
Cantho	20	80,000	10,630	2,035	92,685
Chaudoc	28	70,660	15,090	1,500	82,278
Cholon (town)	74	17,034	----	14,599	31,667
" (inspection)	2	121,236	----	994	122,232
Gocong	13	64,170	----	588	64,771
Hatien	8	6,299	1,633	908	8,848
Longxuyen	16	76,462	2,194	881	79,453
Mytho	70	250,120	----	2,093	252,283
Rachgia	10	8,850	10,350	870	20,080
Sadec	29	125,040	----	1,644	126,713
Giadinh	29	161,944	----	883	162,856
Soctrang	32	25,327	20,161	4,159	49,679
Tanan	15	67,787	----	409	68,211
Tayninh	27	25,933	2,650	339	28,949
Thudamot	22	63,248	----	379	63,649
Travinh	28	45,590	40,160	4,114	89,892
Vinhlong	35	101,480	----	1,391	102,906
20 <sup>th</sup> arrondissement	191	13,532	13	830	14,566
Poulo Condore	13	127	----	190	330
total	2,147	1,606,949	111,564	50,173	1,770,833

Source: CAOM, Indochine, Ancien fonds G 01 (2), c. 111

Taken together, the archival data describe a Chinese population that was still fairly small, especially when compared to twentieth-century numbers; that largely comprised single individuals and was hence quite mobile; and which was overwhelmingly composed of individuals of low socio-economic standing, since the *arrêté* of 1871 automatically

62. Société des Etudes Indo-Chinoises, *Monographie de la Province de Sóc Trăng* (Saigon: Imp. Commerciale Menard & Rey, 1904), p. 77. Thanks to Thomas Engelbert for making this available to me.

placed anyone with a business licence, however low its grade, in one of the top two tax categories.<sup>63</sup> Even so, as the earlier analysis of the Saigon congregation registers has suggested, most of the 498 Chinese individuals in the top two tax categories were comfortable or well-off rather than genuinely wealthy men. In 1879, only small number of Chinese might be regarded as rich, and a tiny handful very rich, since it is unlikely that even all the 57 men in the top tax category would have boasted the first class business licence that marked membership of the effective economic elite.

The main reason for the comparative local dearth of the sort of Chinese tycoons who were visibly emerging by this time in island Southeast arises from a crucial structural dissimilarity between the basic organisation of Chinese economic activity in French Cochinchina, on the one hand, and that common almost everywhere else in Southeast Asia on the other. This crucial disparity was intimately related to the different social form and economic operations of Chinese “secret societies” in southern Vietnam when compared to elsewhere in Southeast Asia, as we will consider in more detail soon. Before doing so, I want briefly to introduce the Heaven and Earth Society in early French Cochinchina, as it emerges from colonial archival materials.

### **The Tiandihui in Early French Cochinchina**

In Qing southern China the formation of unauthorised (hence “secret”) societies sprang from the deep-seated impulse to create social groupings that was endemic to early modern Chinese popular culture there. Its multiple expressions ranged from benign mutual aid organisations like funeral societies to shareholding economic enterprises, often combining contracts with sacralised fictive fraternal bonds (*kongsì*; pinyin *gongsì*),<sup>64</sup> right through to criminal gangs operating as sworn brotherhoods (*hui*). Although illegal, sworn brotherhoods flourished in the southern provinces. They provided pseudo-familial support and protection for marginalised young men forced to make a living far from their families or lineages, as well as supplying an organisational template for others who, for whatever reason, had no scruples about preying on their fellows as criminals.<sup>65</sup>

French archival sources contain examples of both sorts of marginalisation among Tiandihui members in mid-nineteenth century southern Vietnam. The best documented case concerns secret society-affiliated pirates around Hà Tiên, in western Cochinchina, where repeated warfare in the 1840s and 1860s had ruined Chinese pepper plantations and left remaining Chinese seeking other ways to survive. Piracy, endemic along this coast, was a natural choice, and there is evidence that Tiandihui members were heavily involved in it. An 1875 colonial investigation found Ngāi Hư̄ng (Ngee Hin, Ngee Heng, and also Nghĩa Hư̄ng in Vietnamese) affiliated pirates had been active there from at least the 1850s, and that they formed part of a wide-ranging network of *hui*: the local administrator discovered that “all the members of this Society, whether they were in Hong Kong, on Hainan Island, at Singapore, in Siam, Kampot, in Rachgia, Saigon, or Hatien”, were in contact with each other.<sup>66</sup> The Hà Tiên branch was bound together by initiation ceremonies

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63. The poorest paid 5 piastres at this time, although it was raised to 7 in 1890. This method of classification later changed: in 1890 men were assessed in the top tax category if they paid an annual land tax or business licence of more than 60 piastres; and in the 2nd category if their land tax or licence fee payment ranged from 20 to 40 piastres. Lower level business licence holders, like itinerant pedlars, were placed in the 3rd category, with the majority of Chinese. See the 1897 note on capitation paid by foreign Asians in Cochinchina, CAOM GGI 24817.

64. For the contractual underpinnings of such groups, see Robert Gardella, “Enterprises, Contracts and Partnerships: A Case for Chinese Customary Legal Traditions Bridging the Nanyang,” in *Maritime China in Transition, 1750–1850*, ed. Wang Gungwu and Ng Chin-keong (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 2004), pp. 287–98.

65. See David Ownby, “Chinese Hui and the Early Modern Social Order: Evidence from Eighteenth-Century Southeast China,” in *‘Secret Societies’ Reconsidered*, pp. 34–67.

66. Confidential letter of 23 Feb 1875, Hà Tiên administrator to DirInt, Goucoch, Folder #9, 1A22/045 (1).

and rituals whose “order and progress ... [were] regulated according to ancient custom”, he reported. Among these customs was participation in an annual feast, held openly in the local pagoda during the first lunar month. In Hà Tiên, 624 affiliated Chinese gathered for that festivity, presided over by a notorious pirate from the Nguyễn era called Lão Kim. The group’s current leader was a widely feared forty-one year old Minh Hương called Huỳnh Văn Bửu, who preferred to adopt Thanh Nhân hairstyle and clothing. By 1875 he had moved his base to Cà Mau. Within this group, the Tiandihui mutual assistance function continued in a vestigial way: pirates in need could borrow money at the rate of 3 percent per month,<sup>67</sup> and strict accounting, supported by a well-founded fear of the consequences of default, ensured it was reportedly “very rare” for the borrowed money not to be repaid.<sup>68</sup>

These outlaws and similar gangs of thugs inhabited one end of the Tiandihui spectrum in early colonial Cochinchina. At the other end were men for whom the ideal of brotherhood, and the practice of mutual support and protection, were more attractive, especially in the 1870s when impoverished immigrants might have difficulty finding enough resources, in a poor country, to acquit their capitation tax.<sup>69</sup> This side of *hui* membership was revealed in the interviews following an 1880 Chợ Lớn police raid that had uncovered an Ngãi Hưng kongsi house. The kongsi house was a social welfare centre in miniature: it sheltered unemployed or needy members, lodged affiliates travelling from outlying regions, provided a meeting place for all, and even distributed food and other provisions like betel nut and tobacco after meetings.<sup>70</sup> Its “elder brother”, “Master Triều Thành” (identified as Hu Ha Lương), was known to the Chợ Lớn police as a dangerous and violent man, a prime instigator of the regular brawls that had been erupting at the time; but to his unemployed “younger brothers”, the assistance he dispensed might well have made the difference between frugal survival and desperation. With such support on offer, new members were joining at every meeting and loyal “younger brothers” would willingly brawl with rivals in the streets, in outbreaks of gang violence whose ulterior purposes most members could not have known and probably would not have cared about.<sup>71</sup> This socially supportive function

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67. Later in Sóc Trăng the rate was 4%, according to information uncovered by an administrative enquiry of 19 June 1882. 1A.22/044.

68 Ibid. Folder #10 in the same dossier also contains information about a different sworn brotherhood of pirates here. It reports that a mixed group of Hainese, Fujianese, and Teochius had, in late January, gathered in a pagoda where they ate a ritual meal of pig before making a joint vow to become pirates [telegram of 26 Jan 1875]. Within days hundreds of Vietnamese and Khmer had swollen their numbers to about 900 [telegram of 28 January]. The creation of this group echoes Dian Murray’s comments on Tiandihui branches that were formed for criminal ends in “Migration, Protection, and Racketeering: The Spread of the Tiandihui within China,” in *Secret Societies Reconsidered*, pp. 183–84.

69. Andrew Spooner at the Privy Council, minutes of 19 March 1874, GGI L-60 (2), c. 230. We return to this important businessmen with excellent Hokkien contacts below.

70. In interviews with 23 affiliates arrested at the house, 2 described it as ‘la maison de Cong Si’, and 7 said they had gone there either for temporary accommodation or to get money. While most were from Chợ Lớn, one-quarter were from further away: 2 were from Sóc Trăng, 1 from Trà Vinh, 1 from Cần Thơ, 1 from Phnom Penh, and 1 from elsewhere in Cambodia. [See the list in file #24, arrest of 23 affiliates on 15 March 1880, Goucoch 1A22/045 (1)] The association between secret society membership and accommodation for the unemployed is also shown in the aftermath of a brawl involving Fujianese boatmen belonging to two rival secret societies, the Tiandihui and the “Thanh Vương”, each employed by different companies. Of the 17 arrested, 4 were unemployed boatmen who were living on the 2 rice junks involved. See the list attached to the police report to the Chợ Lớn mayor, 5 May 1882, Goucoch, 1A.16/184.

71. Those arrested were released on bail when four of Chợ Lớn’s wealthiest men posted 1,000 piastres in surety. [Note from DirInt to Chợ Lớn mayor, 20 March 1880, Goucoch 1A22/045 (1)]. It proved impossible to hold the men because the offence had been committed within the jurisdiction of French courts and nothing uncovered in the house indicated any threat to the state, as the penal code required for a conviction. The Interior Director tried to have the matter moved to the indigenous courts, where a conviction might have followed, but it was impossible under the decree of 1864 that regulated the legal system at the time. [Silvestre to DirInt, 29 March 1880, Goucoch, 1A.22/044] As the Saigon State Prosecutor subsequently noted, “the mystical formulas or ancient legends [found among these papers] could not constitute serious elements to be raised before the Correctional Tribunal”. As it was a greater threat to French authority and prestige to bring such men to trial, since they must be found innocent

was equally stressed in an 1882 protest note to the Sóc Trăng administrator that said in part: “We want you to know that the Thiên Địa Hội has never intended to overthrow the government; but in coming to this country from China we have no friends. That is why we must make them, so that we can have assistance when we are sick”.<sup>72</sup>

As in China, Tiandihui membership in Vietnam also conferred practical protection in a turbulent world.<sup>73</sup> Members could detect other affiliates by using printed symbols, secret signs, and passwords that could be easily committed to memory in verse form and applied in innumerable social situations to discover brother members, even when the men involved shared no common language.<sup>74</sup> Tiandihui insignia could also identify the bearer as a friend when confronted by outlaws. Such paraphernalia was also considered a protective talisman, as David Ownby has shown and the following example corroborates.<sup>75</sup> When a minor Chinese trader from Vietnamese-ruled Khánh Hòa Province was caught in a French raid in June 1883 and subsequently questioned, he freely admitted Tiandihui membership, unlike virtually all captured Cochinchinese affiliates. He explained that he had joined before leaving Khánh Hòa because he wanted to trade with the Chinese in Huế, all of whom belonged to “the Hồng”, and who would thus badly receive or mistreat any non-affiliated Chinese who tried to deal with them. According to his testimony, the Vietnamese district official who had issued his passport had also given the man a cloth certificate of Thiên Địa Hội membership—which he described as a “talisman”—to show if attacked by pirates on his travels.<sup>76</sup>



**Figure 2. Sketch of Chinese Buildings on the Arroyo Chinois in the Late 1860s**  
Source: Jean Bouchot, *Documents pour servir à l'Histoire de Saigon, 1859 à 1865*  
(Saigon: Ed. Albert Portail, 1927), p. 385

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under French law, he recommended administrative measures like detention and expulsion instead. [Letter of 13 May 1880, Goucoch, 1A.22/044] The Attorney General equally concluded that, as the Society had not “revealed its existence in any external action that constitutes a crime or misdemeanour [it thus] escapes the application of the penal law and the action of the French courts”. [See Dirint to Chợ Lớn mayor, 18 May 1880, citing advice from the Attorney General, both at Goucoch 1A22/045 (1)] It is unclear whether the 23 men involved were subsequently expelled.

72 A short, hand written *quốc ngữ* letter found tied to a stick in the administrator's garden, attachment 2 to the letter of 4 May from Villard to DirInt. Unfortunately most of the handwriting is illegible. Goucoch, 1A.22/044.

73 See Murray, “Migration, Protection, and Racketeering,” pp. 179–81.

74 Mak, *Sociology of Secret Societies*, pp. 29-32. For a Cochinchinese example, see Rougeot, “Rapport sur la Société du Ciel et de la Terre,” an 8 page booklet attached to circular of 25 Nov 1878, Goucoch, 1A.22/044.

75 David Ownby, “The Heaven and Earth Society as Popular Religion,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 54 (1995): 1,039.

76 Interrogation of Trần Gia Hù, 8 June 1883, CAOM, Indochine Nouveaux fonds, 31446.

### Chinese Businessmen and the Heaven and Earth Society in Cochinchina

The Tiandihui in Cochinchina, as revealed in colonial documents, is instantly recognisable as the same society familiar from studies of it in China. What the archives do not yield, however, is any evidence that it played a similar role here as it did in most of Southeast Asia, where secret society related Chinese socio-economic organisations, sworn brotherhoods operating as large-scale kongsis, were so prominent that Carl Trocki has described them as the institutional agencies of social control and avenues of economic advance for many nineteenth-century Southeast Asian Chinese. As Trocki put it, the Ngee Heng was “the original Chinese institution” in early Singapore history.<sup>77</sup> As much scholarship has shown, in island Southeast Asia self-regulating, shareholding kongsis were indispensable for the development of export commodity production (pepper, gambier, gold, tin) from the mid-eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries, after which they tended to develop into instruments of economic power wielded by mercantile elite members in their own interests.<sup>78</sup> Local conditions enabled these kongsis to carve out significant and highly visible economic and social roles inconceivable in mainland China under Qing rule or in Nguyễn Vietnam, where the Tiandihui was as illegal as it was in China (if never as strictly repressed)<sup>79</sup> and where Chinese settlers and sojourners came under increasing administrative pressure from the mid-1830s onward, as was discussed above. In colonial Cochinchina, share-holding Chinese businesses called kongsis certainly existed, but none played an economic or social role comparable to that of the Ngee Heng in early Singapore. So while Tiandihui branches here might call themselves kongsis,<sup>80</sup> they only ever disposed of a fraction of the coercive power and economic resources of similar bodies in Singapore, Penang, Phuket, Borneo, and elsewhere.

Not only were kongsis here of a very different order of economic magnitude than elsewhere in Southeast Asia, so too was Chinese business generally. Its comparatively straitened circumstances in southern Vietnam reflected a fundamental economic and social divergence between this region and much of Southeast Asia at the time. Cochinchina never developed the same labour intensive, export oriented, and opium dependant plantation or extraction industries that numerous studies have shown shaped the nineteenth-century economic system elsewhere. Consequently, the early colony never experienced the mass migration of Chinese coolie labour that drove the growth of Singapore, Penang, the Malay States, and parts of modern Indonesia and Thailand, and upon which the market-oriented segments of their economies crucially depended. As the governor’s Privy Council unhappily recognised in June 1874, all the naval administration’s efforts over several years to develop plantation agriculture had failed and “workers [were still] lacking in Cochinchina, especially in areas essential for industrial cultivation”. The administration dearly wanted entrepreneurs to establish sugar cane, pepper, indigo, and coffee plantations, firmly convinced that such commodities were “destined to become the real and only wealth of the country” because “rice [would] only ever be a meagre product, [...] too cheap a commodity” to generate much prosperity. In the mid-1870s, therefore,

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77. Trocki, “Ngee Heng Kongsis in Singapore”, pp. 91, 95.

78. In addition to *Ibid.*, see the contributions of Mary Somers Heidhues and Sharon A. Carstens in “*Secret Societies*” *Reconsidered*, pp. 68–88 and 120–52. Among numerous studies of nineteenth-century Chinese societies, see Carl A. Trocki, *Opium and Empire* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1990) and Mary Somers Heidhues, *Golddiggers, Traders, and Farmers in the “Chinese Districts” of West Kalimantan, Indonesia* (Ithaca: Cornell SEAP, 2003).

79. King Tự Đức had “amnestied” affiliates in the Huế area in June 1883, according to a Tiandihui letter intercepted in Saigon, but no other sources confirm it or indicate what, if anything, this meant in practice. The French believed it to be a desperate attempt to rally support from anywhere, which is probably correct. For a French translation of the very opaque letter, see CAOM, IC Nouveaux fonds, 31446.

80. Cloth membership certificates, like those discovered on 25 March 1881 in Sóc Trăng, were stamped with characters that read *I Ho kongsi* and *I Heng kongsi* (in *quốc ngữ* translation, “Nghĩa Hòa Công Ty” and “Nghĩa Hưng Công Ty”). See Goucoch, 1A22/045 (1)

special measures were introduced to attract men in the third tax category,<sup>81</sup> who might labour in such enterprises. Nevertheless, immigration data suggest it was at best only a highly qualified success, partly because of the economic malaise of the time.

While Chinese in this lowest tax category were often described as “coolies”,<sup>82</sup> as Table 5 shows at least half of them were urban rather than rural dwellers. Along with labourers, this lowest tax category lumped together a large number of semi-skilled employees, craftsmen and artisans but also skilled workers like painters, carpenters, and tanners, as well as men from a plethora of occupations ranging from servants, waiters, watchmen, revenue farm employees, commission agents selling lottery tickets, itinerant pedlars and rice mill labourers through to market gardeners, and so forth. An important and distinctive component was involved in transportation, both as boatmen and longshoremen. Many lived Spartan lives, sleeping on camp beds in tiny shared rooms in tenement complexes, in Chợ Lớn often owned by the Straits Chinese Hokkien businessman Gan Tin Wee—known universally by his business chop of Ban Hap—or by his Cantonese rival and occasional partner Cheung Ah Lum, also much better known by a corrupted version of his business chop as Wang Tai.<sup>83</sup> Yet crucially, unlike their compatriots elsewhere who were trapped in rural kongsi lines, the vast majority were not saleable commodities, mired in debt to recruiters before their arrival, nor could their consumption be controlled by either employers or landlords. Chinese secret societies in Cochinchina thus never found the necessary elements that would allow them to entwine themselves around the institutional motor of the emerging market economy.

Without the opportunity to exploit indebted coolie masses and to recoup their wages bill by selling captive consumers revenue-farmed opium and other necessities at exorbitant mark-ups, Chinese businessmen in Cochinchina lacked the main mechanism for secure, large-scale capital accumulation that the system delivered elsewhere to compatriots like the Penang “Big Five” families or the Khaw dynasty in Thailand.<sup>84</sup> So while revenue farming in Cochinchina was a very important Chinese business in the 1860s and 1870s, it was far more risky here than in most other areas (outside Cambodia) because it lacked consistent coolie consumption to drive the system during economic downturns. Major revenue farmers like the Tan Keng brothers, Ban Hap, or Wang Tai cushioned the risks with investments in other businesses;<sup>85</sup> but none of these could provide the quantum, or

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81. Privy Council discussion of the draft order to encourage labour immigration, 2 June 1874, CAOM, Indochine AF, F 80 (1), c. 111.

82. For the use of “coolie” to describe men with business licences below the 5th grade, or who owned no land, see “Résumé sommaire des réglemens qui régissent l’immigration en Cochinchine,” 7 Feb 1884, CAOM, GGI, FA 11490.

83. We return to both men below. For slum conditions in these two tenements in 1881, see the extract from the Hygiene Commission’s report to Saigon Municipal Council printed in André Baudrit, *Contribution à l’histoire de Saigon* (Saigon: Imp. Modern, n. d.), vol. 2, p. 137.

84. For the Khaw, see Jennifer Cushman, *Family and State: The Formation of a Sino–Thai Tin Mining Dynasty, 1797–1932* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1991) and for Penang, Wong, “Rise and Fall of the Big Five,” chs. 3–5. The system is widely documented. For an overview analysis, see Carl A. Trocki, *Opium, Empire and the Global Political Economy* (London: Routledge, 1999), ch. 7.

85. Tan Keng Sing established a consignment and supply business in 1861, which had expanded into the provision of construction timber by 1865, the year in which he became a partner in the Ban Hap opium farm. His brother Keng Ho was a major rice merchant by 1874, while his other brother, Keng Hoon, helped manage the opium farm. [See Claudine Salmon and Ta Trong Hiep, “De Batavia à Saigon: Notes de voyage d’un marchand chinois (1890),” *Archipel* 47 (1994): 158–59. An edited English translation appears in this edition of *Chinese Southern Diaspora Studies*] Wang Tai arrived in 1862 and early moved into construction of government buildings, including the supply of bricks and tiles from his own factories, and into revenue farming. [See Choi, “Cheung Ah-Lum”: 282–87, and Nola Cooke, “King Norodom’s Revenue Farming System in later-Nineteenth-Century Cambodia and his Chinese Revenue Farmers (1860–1891),” *Chinese Southern Diaspora Studies* 1 (2007): 51, where his is called by the Mandarin version of his name, Zhang Peilin] In the late 1860s and 1870s Wang Tai’s name appears regularly in Privy Council minutes detailing administrative contracts with local businessmen, especially in relation to construction but also to revenue farming, of alcohol especially.

security, of cash flow possible from milking the daily consumption needs of tens of thousands of coolies.

Revenue farms lived on cash flow, as they had to acquit their rents to government on a monthly basis in advance. If profits dried up for any reason, as they did in the 1874 economic downturn in Cochinchina, monthly payments had to be topped up, or even largely sourced, from funds elsewhere. Aware of such contingencies, a well run and profitable business amassed reserves against such eventualities, but the opium farm had been poorly managed for some years, and its funds reportedly embezzled with impunity by employees.<sup>86</sup> A combination of three factors triggered the dangerous 1874 profit slump: unchecked smuggling, often involving Europeans and European flagged liners out of Hong Kong and Singapore;<sup>87</sup> an exceptionally poor harvest that stalled economic life generally; and the administration's decision to abolish the gambling revenue farm, another major Ban Hap Company enterprise. These factors coming together denied the company any way through the crisis. Opium smoking was common among gamblers,<sup>88</sup> and without gambling to help lift opium consumption during a general economic downturn disaster loomed. After eight months of borrowing to cover monthly repayments, Ban Hap's credit finally ran out and at least one major Chinese shareholder withdrew his investment. With nowhere left to turn, the company reluctantly sought government assistance at the point of bankruptcy.

As part of its bail-out, the naval administration grudgingly sold the Ban Hap Company the rice wine monopoly at a low rent for three years, to help extricate it from debt and to restore Ban Hap's personal credit. In return, however, the Chinese syndicate had to swallow a number of reforms, foremost among them appointing Andrew Spooner as its fully empowered managing director.<sup>89</sup> Spooner already had more than a decade's experience in dealing with Chinese businessmen in Singapore and Cochinchina, in the opium business as well as other ventures, and under his active oversight the farm returned to profitability by 1875. Spooner's stewardship lasted a little over three years, in which time farm returns went from an 80,000 piastre loss in 1874 to profits of 301,000 piastres in 1877 and of 227,000 piastres for the first half of 1878 alone.<sup>90</sup>

It is during Spooner's management of the opium farm that we first begin to catch a glimpse of shadowy structures within the farm that suggest secret society involvement. As part of his reforms, Spooner reported that he had dismissed "a certain number of Asians [meaning Chinese], a sort of clientele without clearly defined functions".<sup>91</sup> These men were very likely *hui* members of some sort, perhaps put in place to protect the interests of "elder brothers" among the dozens of Chinese investors in the syndicate. They could also have been quietly inserted into the farm to facilitate the sale to other farm employees of opium smuggled into Cochinchina by their *hui* brothers. Spooner noted rumours of this practice, as later would Jules Silvestre, the Government Opium Commissioner who performed a

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86. For details, see Privy Council minutes, 18 and 19 March 1874, CAOM, Indochine AF, L-60 (2), c. 230.

87. See, for instance, DirInt's report to the Ministry [MinCols], 12 June 1874: "This contraband notoriously operates in the boldest fashion; from when they enter the River, the ships scatter chests of opium along their route, either by stopping at determined points or by offloading the goods to small boats that call out to them along the way." Saigon River pilots were heavily implicated, he added. [CAOM, Indochine AF, L-60 (3), c. 230] Opium also haemorrhaged from the farm's own factory, whose many entries and poor layout made proper surveillance "almost impossible," according to Spooner, who upgraded its security. [Memoir of 28 Feb 1875, Privy Council minutes, 1 Ap 1875, Idem] As both these documents, and others in dossier L-60 (2), c. 230 confirm, French legal safeguards also hamstrung the Ban Hap Company's ability to deal adequately with smuggling.

88. Spooner's memoir, Privy Council minutes, 1 Ap 1875, CAOM, Indochine AF, L-60 (2), c. 230.

89. For this period, and for Spooner, see Denis, *Bordeaux et la Cochinchine*, chs. 9–10.

90. Spooner, memorandum to GovCC (undated but probably 24 Aug 1878), CAOM, Indochine AF, L-60 (5), c. 230. These amounts should be compared to the best return claimed by the Chinese farmers in 1872, of 120,000 piastres in profit. [Privy Council minutes, 21 March 1874, held at CAOM, Indochine L-60 (2), c. 230] For a very general overview of the opium revenue farm in these years, see Chantal Descours-Gatin, *Quand l'opium finançait la colonisation en Indochine* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1992), chs. 1–2.

91. Memoir of 28 Feb 1875, Privy Council minutes, 1 Ap 1875, CAOM, Indochine AF, L-60 (2), c. 230.

much reduced version of Spooner's role after the administration resold the farm by tender in 1878 to more or less the same Chinese syndicate that had previously run it into the ground. Both men reported that licensed opium farm managers in the countryside tolerated or even engaged in smuggling because many sold contraband opium through their retail outlets.<sup>92</sup> That the Tiandihui would have been involved in at least some of these operations is indisputable, as the failure of rewards offered by Spooner for the capture of opium farm employees involved in smuggling tends to confirm.<sup>93</sup> By late 1880, opium smuggling was reaching unprecedented levels in some parts of the colony,<sup>94</sup> causing steep falls in official opium sales in several key markets, principally in Chợ Lớn but also in six of the eight most populous and wealthy Chinese provincial areas (Vĩnh Long, Sa Đéc, Sóc Trăng, Châu Đốc, Cần Thơ, and Mỹ Tho).<sup>95</sup> Elsewhere, however, official sales remained stable. Silvestre concluded from this pattern that certain areas were being targeted, which further suggested to him specific rather than general causes for the situation.

As all this was unfolding, secret society activity began to boil over, with brawls between different factions or groups repeatedly disturbing the peace in Chợ Lớn and elsewhere. The synchronicity of events is striking. It is hard not to relate this new intensity of violence to heightened subterranean competition between secret society factions or rival groups over the spoils of opium smuggling, both at the time and for the future. If so, the question then arises: who stood to gain most from manoeuvres against the farm?

When the Ban Hap syndicate was formed in the mid-1860s, there had been about fifty principals, according to Spooner.<sup>96</sup> Given that there were only nineteen Chinese with business licences in the first three classes in the colony in mid-1864, several small investors must have been involved, and quite probably a number of men from outside the colony as well.<sup>97</sup> Certainly, they could not have all been Fujianese and, despite the rivalry between the Fujianese and Cantonese congregations at times, in the mid-1870s we know from Saigon congregation registers that several opium farm shareholders were prominent Cantonese.<sup>98</sup> Then in 1878 Ban Hap had agreed to allocate his rivals shares equally to two-fifths of the business if his company won that year's tender for the combined opium and alcohol farm.<sup>99</sup> According to Spooner, there were thirty-two principals in the 1878

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92. See Spooner's note of 5 Oct, 1877, and copy of a letter from Silvestre to Dirlnt, 28 Dec 1880, both attached to Colonial Council minutes of 9 Feb 1881, in *Journal officiel de la Cochinchine française*, 12 Feb 1881, p. 154, held at CAOM, Indochine AF, L-60 (4), c. 230.

93. Memoir of 28 Feb 1875, in Privy Council minutes of 1 Ap 1875, CAOM, Indochine AF, L-60 (4), c. 230.

94. At this time, Ban Hap and Tan Keng Sing were key shareholders in the company running the Hong Kong opium farm, which took up the monopoly in early 1879. [See Carl A. Trocki, "The Internationalization of Chinese Revenue Farming Networks," in *Water Frontier*, pp. 161–64] Hong Kong was one point of origin for opium smuggled into Cochinchina, so their control of the local farm would have given them easy access to the drug for such purposes.

95. By a complex calculation involving the amount of legal opium sold and the quantity of dross returned to the factory in Chợ Lớn, Silvestre calculated that over 12,500 piastres of contraband opium had been smoked in Chợ Lớn in November 1880 alone, compared to over 16,600 piastres of legal opium. If correct, it means that a staggering 43% of the opium smoked would have been contraband. See Silvestre to Dirlnt, 28 Dec 1880, CAOM, Indochine AF, L-60 (4), c. 230.

96. See Spooner, note of 5 Oct 1877, *JOCF*, p. 154, in *Ibid.*

97. Ban Hap and Tan Keng Sing at least would surely have been among the 8 Chinese with first class licences at the time. For the numbers, see Bouchot, *Documents pour servir l'Histoire*, p. 211.

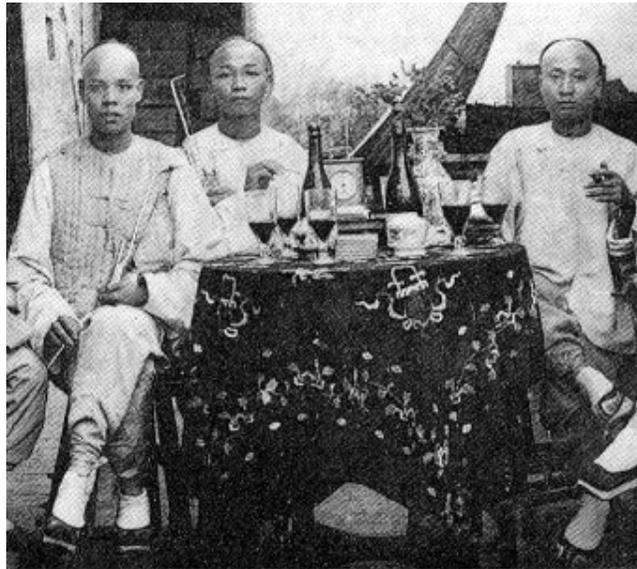
98. In 1873 they included Sam Ho (Tching Phat Inne) and Tchio Yut Moune, both shareholders in the opium farm, and Lou Peck Son, "cashier of the opium farm". In 1874, the last two appeared as before, but Sam Ho was now described as a merchant. [See Goucoch 1B 38/0511] Sam Ho had been one of Ban Hap's guarantors (along with the Tan Keng brothers) in 1870 when the company took up the Cambodian opium farm. See Cambodian National Archives, dossier 4417.

99. The administration had received a private offer from the Chinese consortium of only 935,000 piastres over 3 years for the combined alcohol and opium farm. Spooner intervened, playing on the Chinese fear that he would bid for the farm after managing it so successfully. This intervention led to a public tendering process in which Spooner's casting of a blank bid caused the Ban Hap syndicate to raise its offer substantially. See Spooner's undated memorandum to Gov. Krantz (probably 24 Aug 1878), CAOM, Indochine AF, L-60 (5), c. 230.

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consortium.<sup>100</sup> Consequently, by 1880 we can assume that a fairly large proportion of the fifty-seven richest Chinese businessmen in the colony<sup>101</sup> (and likely some from outside it) were shareholders in the opium farm. Among them was Ban Hap's earlier Cantonese competitor, Wang Tai. It is easy to imagine that some of these men might choose to put private interests ahead of those of the farm, especially men with contacts in secret society circles.

The farm was also a huge employer. Even its top structure was large: in the late 1860s, Eliacin Luro reported that there were between 1,200 and 1,500 licensed opium retailers in all the large market towns and villages in the colony,<sup>102</sup> while above these men was a smaller network of twenty or more regional office managers. To these should be added workers in the opium factory, carriers transporting the drug, and security guards. In 1880, some of the farm's disgruntled shareholders confided in Silvestre that many of the provincial office managers were becoming rich very quickly "because they authorise secret sales in which they sell more smuggled opium than that of the farm".<sup>103</sup> It is inconceivable that this large body of employees would have contained no secret society members.<sup>104</sup>



**Figure 3. Chinese Businessmen in rue Catinat. c. 1890s**

Source: Mr. Nguyen Tan Loc ([http://nguyentl.free.fr/html/cadre\\_sommaire\\_vn.htm](http://nguyentl.free.fr/html/cadre_sommaire_vn.htm))

The broad answer to my question, then, is that, with the abolition of the farm already decided in early 1880, any number of opium farm shareholders or employees with secret society contacts stood to gain immediately from undercutting the farm before the system changed and also, in the longer term, by carving out their own local smuggling territories

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100. It is unclear from his report whether this figure included the company's former rivals. See Spooner's memorandum of 3 June 1878 at Goucoch, 1B 36/211 (4).

101. See Table 5; there were only 57 first class business licences issued in 1879.

102. E. Luro, report of 4 Sept 1869, annexed to minutes of the 1881 Colonial Council debate, *JOCF*, p. 153, in CAOM, GGI, Indochine L-60 (4), c. 230.

103. Copy of Silvestre to DirInt, 28 Dec 1880, in *Ibid*, p. 156.

104. That a piece of stationery from a company involved in the rice wine farm was seized in the Ngāi Hung kongsi house when 23 members were arrested in March 1880 tends to confirm this. See Silvestre's letter of 29 March, Goucoch, 1A.22/044.

and networks before the *régie* began. It is not surprising therefore that, by late 1881, the French official appointed to set up the *régie* was reporting that “unbridled smuggling has enveloped in the country and the reports of [French] sworn agents claim that it is carried out by the bosses of the Farm themselves, or at least with their knowledge and obviously self-interested consent”.<sup>105</sup> Similar information came to Silvestre: as the Chinese opium farm syndicate disintegrated in late 1881, individual shareholders began informing him of discussions held behind closed doors in board meetings.<sup>106</sup>

Unfortunately, the identity of only a tiny number of men in the opium syndicate is now known. Nevertheless, extant documents point towards secret society connections in regard to three of them, all first class business licence holders. They are Wang Tai, Ban Hap, and Tan Keng Ho. We begin with the one for whom the evidence is strongest, Wang Tai.

Wang Tai was mentioned three times in documents seized in March 1880 in Chợ Lớn. One of them was only a passing reference (see below), but the other two were more substantial. One described action to be taken against a renegade affiliate who would curse the Ngāi Hưng whenever he got drunk. He was to be “sent before Wang Tai” to be judged and then expelled from the *hui*.<sup>107</sup> The other document reported on Wang Tai’s attempt to unite two feuding Tiandihui groups. If my analysis of the reasons underlying these feuds at the time is correct, such conciliatory efforts were unlikely to succeed; however the attempt itself may hint that Wang Tai, a member of the opium farm Administrative Board,<sup>108</sup> might not have been personally involved in the earliest manoeuvres against it.<sup>109</sup> Even so, these references do indicate that Wang Tai was a senior figure in the Society, most likely in the Ngāi Hưng faction. The evidence linking the two other opium farm luminaries to secret societies in the early 1880s is more circumstantial, but nevertheless still persuasive. We begin with Ban Hap and then consider his close partner Tan Keng Ho.

Among the Ngāi Hưng documents seized in a Chợ Lớn raid in March 1880 was one without date or seal purporting to be from Ban Hap. It instructed the unnamed recipient(s) about some matter—although no details were given it might possibly have referred to action being taken regarding the recently arrested Teochiu Nghĩa Hưng leader Lam Ky Tuong, alias Pé Ko or Pé Ho<sup>110</sup>—and ordered that “the parties must leave it to Wang Tai;

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105. Boyer to DirInt, 29 Sept 1881, Goucoch, 1B36/183 (6/2).

106. Silvestre to DirInt, 10 Oct 1881, Goucoch, 1B36/183 (6/2).

107. From Silvestre’s analysis of the documents, letter to DirInt, 29 March 1880, Goucoch 1A.22/044.

108. He is described as a member of the *Conseil d’Administration de la ferme* in 1881, in a letter from Boyer to DirInt, 29 Sept 1881, Goucoch, 1B36/183 (6/2). Wang Tai’s company had run the opium farm briefly in 1864–65, and again in 1866 [see Denis, *Bordeaux et la Cochinchine*, p. 195], before the Ban Hap Company monopolised its operations. In 1873 he had been associated with the failed Singaporean bid for the opium farm, headed by the local branch of Wu Watseng and Company [Privy Council minutes 26 & 29 Sept 1873, CAOM, Indochine AF, L-60 (2), c. 230]. In 1874 he was called a public works entrepreneur in the Saigon Cantonese congregation list [Goucoch 1B38/0511] suggesting he might not have held any shares before 1878. Spooner said the names of 32 principal Chinese shareholders were later published [memorandum of 3 June 1878, Goucoch, 1B 36/211 (4)] but I have found no trace of them in the archives. In the 1880s, Wang Tai’s company operated the official opium factory and the alcohol revenue farm [see various documents in CAOM, Indochine AF, L-60 (5), c. 230]. His business empire spread to Cambodia in the same decade. See Cooke, “King Norodom’s Revenue Farming System”: 51–53.

109. For a brief précis of the document mentioned in the attempt to unite the Tiandihui, see Chợ Lớn mayor to DirInt, 20 March 1880, Goucoch, 1A22/045 (1).

110. He was caught in February 1880 after having escaped from arrest in May 1879 while in possession of *hui* documents and membership lists. Three Chinese found in his house in July 1879 were subsequently expelled from the colony. Pé Ko, “according to public repute and the head of his congregation,” was the main instigator of most brawls between Chinese in Chợ Lớn while in hiding, although his arrest may have made him a convenient scapegoat. The 1879 report on this brawling between Teochiu and Fujianese “secret society adherents ... who are affiliated to rival groups,” is the first extant archival reference yet found to secret society factions. Unfortunately, it is unclear if the rivalry followed dialect lines, or was between broader factions like the Ngāi Hưng, Ngāi Hòa, and Ngāi Phước whose names first appeared in documents found in March 1880 [see next note]. See Chợ Lớn weekly report, 17 May 1879 [CAOM FA 10588], the police report of the arrest, 18 Feb 1880, and subsequent letter from Chợ Lớn mayor to DirInt, 24 Feb 1880, both Goucoch 1A22/057 (3).

to wait until the lawyer has written a memorandum on the matter and to wait also for the approval of the Governor. After that approval, the parties must pay the lawyer's fee, without further discussion." This is hardly incriminating; yet if genuine it does show Ban Hap was in contact with *hui* members and influential enough to issue orders to them. The letter also included an intriguingly blunt admonition: "Lesser men must follow the advice of the great, the great lead the small."<sup>111</sup> These are not the pseudo-familial terms one might expect from an "elder brother" to his sworn "younger brothers",<sup>112</sup> and it raises a fascinating possibility about internal Tiandihui rivalry that is worth exploring.

Archival documents from 1888 refer to a widespread public belief that Ban Hap was a leader of the Hokkien Ngāi Hòa faction of the Tiandihui.<sup>113</sup> The first archival evidence of the existence of this faction comes from the same 1880 haul of documents discussed here. Elsewhere in Southeast Asia it was not unusual for important Chinese businessmen to organise their own sworn brotherhoods, sometimes to defend their particular interests against former Tiandihui brothers. One such example occurred in 1844 Penang, when members of the "Big Five" families quit the Ngee Heng (Ghee Hin) to form their own rival *hui*.<sup>114</sup> Ban Hap was a Singapore Hokkien and no doubt aware of such arrangements. So might this curt dismissal of Ngāi Hưng members as "small men" in early 1880 hint at his own connection with the rival Ngāi Hòa at that time? Ban Hap was already a wealthy man early in French rule—in 1864 "a millionaire" according to the first Interior Director, Paulin Vial.<sup>115</sup> Such wealth required protection, and Ban Hap would have surrounded himself with his own men, either Tiandihui "younger brothers" or members of his own sworn *hui*. Such men might have figured among the "clientele without any clear role" whom Spooner later dismissed from opium farm employ. Under Ban Hap's patronage, his personal clientele could have expanded from either or both sources into the Ngāi Hòa group that emerged into the archival record in the late 1870s, when a competitive secret society recruiting campaign broke out in Cochinchina, with Vietnamese being targeted alongside Chinese.<sup>116</sup> If Ban Hap was an Ngāi Hòa boss, he would be on the winning side of the secret society struggle in early 1880s Sóc Trăng. According to information from the protectorate representative in Cambodia in mid-1883, after the 1882 colonial crackdown in Sóc Trăng, "the leaders of the Nghi Hưng came to Cambodia to take refuge and have not yet been successful in reaching an understanding with the Nghi Hòa [Ngāi Hòa] bosses" back in the colony.<sup>117</sup>

Where the later struggle for Sóc Trăng was concerned, a Hokkien like Ban Hap would have benefited from having a powerful Teochiu ally to deal with the predominantly Teochiu local affiliates. One possible candidate is Yo Seng Ton, by 1882 a very wealthy

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111. Cited in a letter from Silvestre, then head of the Native Justice Service, to DirInt, 29 March 1880. Unfortunately, the original documents could not be traced. See Goucoch, 1A.22/044.

112. Compare this to the familial tone and opaque language in an authentic Ngee Heng letter from Hué, whose discovery in June 1883 caused the expulsion of the Vietnamese consuls from Saigon. CAOM, Indochine, Nouveaux Fonds, 31446.

113. Vietnamese had disrupted a Fujianese celebration in late August 1888, and in subsequent brawling some Fujianese had engaged the police in a serious fight. The daily police report noted: "According to information taken down, this brawl had broken out at the instigation of Mr Ban Hap, and the combatants were all members of a secret society called 'Nghi Hòa'". See Saigon police commissioner's daily report, 31 August–1 Sept 1888, CAOM, GGI FA 9025.

114. This was the Kian Teik Tong, better known as Toa Peh Kong. It became very influential, with branches in Siam, Burma, Sumatra, and the western Malay states. Wong, "Big Five of Penang", pp. 54, 57–58.

115. Calculated in francs, not piastres. Vial, *Premières années de la Cochinchine*, vol. 1, p. 351.

116. Teochiu and Fujianese going to the interior of the colony were reportedly pressed to join in the mid-1870s [DirInt circular, 9 Feb 1875], with the first recorded Vietnamese involvement in 1878 [DirInt circular 25 Nov 1878, both Goucoch, 1A.22/044]. The first extant archival reference to factional conflict came in early 1879.

117. Representative Fourès to GovCC, 9 July 1883, CAOM, GGI FA 11972. For a brief discussion of the Tiandihui in early 1880s Cambodia, see the introduction to the translated Heaven and Earth Society letter in this issue of *Chinese Southern Diaspora Studies*.

Teochiu rice merchant. He had arrived in Cochinchina around 1862, when Ban Hap was already well established in Chợ Lớn. By the 1880s, the two men sat together on the Chợ Lớn Municipal Council and both held the status of *admis à domicile en France*.<sup>118</sup> Given his wealth, Yo Seng Ton was also a likely investor in the opium farm syndicate. Furthermore, the archives contain two Tiandihui-related references to him. In 1879, he had joined the then congregation head to bail out Teochiu Tiandihui members arrested late that year in Chợ Lớn; and in mid-1882 his business chop (Phuoc Ky) appeared on a list naming five Chợ Lớn-based “great chiefs” of the Society that was found among Tiandihui documents captured in Sóc Trăng.<sup>119</sup> Neither reference is conclusive, and a mid-1883 search of his Chợ Lớn premises uncovered nothing incriminating, although by that time a prudent fear of extraordinary administrative punishments, including sequestration of personal property, ensured no sensible affiliate would risk keeping Society materials in his home or business premises.

Yo Seng Ton was not the only Teochiu who could have provided Hokkien Ngāi Hòa leaders with an entrée to Teochiu circles. Another was one of Ban Hap’s closest associates, the Straits-born English subject, Tan Keng Ho. Ho’s brother, Tan King Sing, had been a secret society leader in early 1850s Amoy,<sup>120</sup> but the French had never caught wind of his family’s disreputable past. So respectable did Ho appear in colonial eyes that in 1879 he was invited to take the place of Simon Lao, a Cantonese businessman fleeing bankruptcy proceedings, on the Saigon Municipal Council.<sup>121</sup> Most unusually, this Hokkien-speaking Saigon resident was listed as a founder member of the Chợ Lớn Teochiu Club in 1879, clearly indicating cordial relations with some influential Teochiu at the time.<sup>122</sup> Tan Keng Ho’s own name would also be linked to the Tiandihui in 1882, through some boatmen in his employ. They had been enthusiastic participants in a rolling series of brawls, on 1 and 2 May that year, with men from another boat, also crewed by Fujianese but members of the rival “Thanh Vương” [Pure Prince] society. The fighting had been triggered by a minor collision during the docking of their rice barges. Chợ Lớn Police Commissioner Tourillon reported that Tan’s crew were Thiên Địa Hội members, adding that the Fujian congregation was split between these two secret societies at the time. Frustrated by the lack of cooperation the police received in such cases, Tourillon vainly requested that future public brawls be met with “energetic measures” aimed both at the combatants and at the businesses that employed them since, rather than assist police, the employers did all they

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118. For Yo Seng Ton, see the police report of 15 June 1882, Goucoch, 1A.22/044. Ban Hap and his brother Gan Tine Koun had been admitted to that status by decrees of 22 June 1875 and 3 June 1876 after naturalisation was extended to Cochinchina in 1874. [See undated note pinned to internal regulations of the Fujian Congregation Club, of which Ban Hap was founding president in 1877, along with his brother and Tan Keng Ho as vice-presidents, Goucoch, 1A.6/205 (3).] An intermediate status towards naturalisation, being *admis à domicile* granted French civil rights to selected foreign residents. In 1889 those who were *admis à domicile* were given 5 years to take up citizenship or revert to alien status. [See M. F. P. Herchenroder, “The French Law of Domicile in Relation to Foreigners,” *Journal of Comparative Legislation and International Law*, 3rd series, 19 (1937): 239–44] I have no evidence of either man’s choice, but neither were naturalised French electors in 1893. See lists at Goucoch, 1A.17/026 and 1A.17/027.

119. The homes of all five were searched thoroughly but nothing incriminating was uncovered. It later transpired that none had business contacts with Sóc Trăng. By mid-1882, a list like this might have been fabricated to raise members’ morale during the repression. Nevertheless, the possibility of its being genuine should not be ignored. See the 5 police reports of 15 June, 1882, in Goucoch, 1A.22/044

120. C.-H. Yen, *Coolies and Mandarins: China’s Protection of Overseas Chinese during the Late Ch’ing Period (1851-1911)* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1985), pp. 28–29. Thanks to Carl Trocki for the reference.

121. *BOCF* (1879): 81.

122. The club was short-lived and was closed for infringing the official rules by allowing gambling and the entry of non-members. Tan was also a member of the Fujianese Club opened in 1877. For both clubs, see “Cholon. Cercles, Trieu Chua, Canton, Fo Kien, 1877-80,” File# 1, Goucoch, 1A.6/205 (3).

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could to hide the men and help them to flee.<sup>123</sup> In other words, the employers acted precisely as one might expect from “older brothers” in a secret society.

While the foregoing account necessarily remains circumstantial, one final archival document does add more substance in regard to Ban Hap. In February that year Governor General Piquet wrote to Paris about opium smuggling in Cochinchina. While admitting he had “no material proof,” which therefore precluded any legal action, he believed that larger-scale smuggling was carried out by two groups, one:<sup>124</sup>

a company formed by Chinese of the Fujianese Congregation, almost all of them members of the former farm and among whom people cite ... Lic Thion,<sup>125</sup> [while] Ban Hap, former farmer in Cochinchina and at present still the opium farmer in Tourane and Binh Dinh [in central Vietnam], has also formed a company to the same end.

If the governor general's information was correct, Ban Hap had broken with his former syndicate partners to pursue his own operation, a parting of the ways that may well have begun as far back as 1880. Although no secret society involvement is mentioned here, it can surely be assumed: such large-scale smuggling invariably involved secret societies in other parts of Southeast Asia, given the need for a loyal criminal clientele to guard shipments, protect distribution, enforce silence, and punish betrayal.

All things considered, it therefore seems to me that these three major businessmen, and probably Tan Keng Sing as well,<sup>126</sup> were active secret society members at the end of the 1870s and in the early 1880s, when the opium farm was disintegrating and the struggle for Sóc Trăng was about to begin.

### The Tiandihui Struggle for Sóc Trăng

In the 1870s, Sóc Trăng, with its troublesome and disobedient Chinese population, was no plum administrative post. In the early 1880s, after nearly two years of secret society inspired rioting and upheaval, no Frenchman had a good word for this frontier province. As the Interior Director reported to the Colonial Council in August 1882, Sóc Trăng, and its Bạc Liêu region especially, was “the promised land of Chinese immigrants”. Here the Chinese had:<sup>127</sup>

developed habits of dangerous independence; not only do they bring to this region and preserve [here] their own customs, organisation, and language, but they have also imposed them to a certain extent on the rest of the population; everywhere

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123. Tourillon to Chợ Lớn mayor, 5 May 1882, Goucoch, 1A.16/184. Unfortunately, I have found no other information on the rival group.

124. Letter of 22 Feb 1890, CAOM, Indochine AF, L-60 (8), c. 230.

125. Sometimes written as Litchiong, he was an active member of the opium farm Board of Directors in 1881 [See Silvestre's letter of 10 May 1881, Goucoch, 1B36/183 (6/2)], but he was Cantonese, not Hokkien. In 1875, he was listed as an opium farm shareholder, and one of only twenty Saigon Cantonese with first class business licenses in the incomplete congregational registers at Goucoch, 1B38/0511.

126. In 1879, he was described by a journalist in the *China Mail* as involved in opium revenue farming in places where secret society involvement was well known (Singapore, the Straits, and Hong Kong) as well as in Saigon. Cited in Trocki, “Internationalization of Chinese Revenue Farming”, p. 168.

127. DirInt report to Colonial Council, 28 August 1882, Goucoch, 1A12/162 (9). In certain essentials, 1904 comments on the Chinese in Sóc Trăng are surprisingly similar, especially for the attitude attributed to local Chinese that this area was a sort of Chinese colony. [See *Province de Sóc Trăng*, pp. 77-78] In Bạc Liêu, which was created in part from Sóc Trăng in 1882, Chinese influence was even more pervasive in the early twentieth century, with the administrator reporting that throughout most of the province the Vietnamese also spoke “Chinese,” presumably Teochiu. Cited in Pierre Brocheux, *The Mekong Delta* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, Center for Southeast Asian Studies, 1995), p. 99.

else where they are numerically fewer than the natives among whom they live, they have in reality been absorbed and become Ming Huong. Here the Chinese remain Chinese. In a little time the place will become Chinese land.... Nowhere else have they found conditions so favourable [for them]. If the head of the Thiên Địa Hội is in Cholon, we may say that its body is in Bac Lieu. It is there alone that it has taken root, that it has been able to affirm itself through its deeds, to make its action felt, to set itself up freely, and to develop its influence.

In November that year, arguing for the creation of the first new province in French Cochinchina, the Director underscored the problem Bạc Liêu posed politically. It was a "pirate lair which has continued until now to elude all control;" many of its outlaw denizens had previously been "expelled from the Colony [but] have found the means to return here and continue to exercise their terrible trade with impunity, without fear of the strictures of our laws".<sup>128</sup> Unhappy at the cost but resigned to the necessity, the Colonial Council agreed to vote the funds to create the new province.

The same factors that made Sóc Trăng so unappealing to the administration were precisely what attracted the favourable attention of those disaffected opium farm participants, whether shareholders, office managers, or secret society members, who were seeking to position themselves and their networks to control opium smuggling opportunities when the *régie* came into operation. The administration knew that malicious rumours were being deliberately circulated in the Chinese community regarding the quality of the *régie*'s opium, and that in some places existing Chinese opium retailers were being intimidated into refusing to apply for *régie* retail licenses.<sup>129</sup> Nevertheless, French officials never believed that serious opposition would persist long after the *régie* became operational, nor that it would take an organised form. Consequently, after the opium farm was abolished, Saigon made a fundamental error and allowed the farm's former agents to stay in Sóc Trăng, despite the local administrator's request that they be sent back to Chợ Lớn. Of those who remained after the farm closed, we can assume with near certainty that most were Tiandihui, of one or other rival branch. In early 1882, Inspector Villard identified them as the core of the bandit groups that were pillaging the countryside, stealing paddy, and burning isolated houses. They were undoubtedly also involved in secret society recruiting.<sup>130</sup>

The first extant secret society incident occurred in March 1880, only weeks after the Colonial Council voted to abolish the opium revenue farm, but then nothing overtly serious appeared again until much later in the year. In September, the local colonial inspector was informed privately that for months, despite the apparent calm, secret society bands had been going into villages, holding meetings, and enrolling willing or intimidated new members, including Khmer and Vietnamese village notables as well as Vietnamese, Ming Hương, Sino-Khmer, and Khmer villagers. So powerful were they becoming that Vietnamese canton chiefs, one of the principal French sources of information in the countryside, were starting to fall silent out of fear.<sup>131</sup> For the first time de Sainteny was also warned that bitter rivalry between Ngãi Hưng and Ngãi Hòa factions of the Thiên Địa Hội posed a real danger of violence escalating in the province.<sup>132</sup> In the next four months, seven riots suddenly erupted. Significantly, around this time the Hong Kong revenue farm

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128. Colonial Council debate, 17 Nov 1882, Goucoch, 1A12/162 (9). Bạc Liêu was created on 14 Dec 1882, as detailed in Goucoch, 1A12/162 (1).

129. See Tây Ninh inspector to Boyer, 10 Nov 1881; Boyer to DirInt, 15 Nov 1881; Boyer to DirInt, 16 Nov 1881; and GovCC to DirInt, 17 Nov 1881, all in Goucoch, 1B36/183 (6/20).

130. See Villard to DirInt, 14 Jan 1882, Goucoch 1A22/045 (1).

131. Sainteny to DirInt, 27 Nov 1880, in Goucoch, 1A.22/044.

132. Sóc Trăng monthly reports, August, Sept, Oct, Nov 1880, in Ibid.

operated by Ban Hap and Tan Keng Sing (in association with certain other Straits Chinese) also fell apart, and by December 1880 the former partners were involved in litigation before the Hong Kong Supreme Court. It may be that the collapse of their Hong Kong venture, and their soured relations with former business partners, now prompted Ban Hap and Keng Sing to make a serious bid to control the western provinces of Cochinchina, with their large Chinese populations and easy smuggling opportunities. Whatever the case, the demise of the Hong Kong venture coincided with the real eruption of open conflict in Sóc Trăng, culminating in a free-for-all involving 400 armed affiliates in Sóc Trăng market on 17 December.

Dealing effectively with this riotous behaviour was a headache for the administration at this time because shortcomings in the colonial legal framework facilitated rather than deterred large-scale brawling. When a handful of arrests were made, or evidence collected “with great difficulty”, the police could still only establish a simple misdemeanour, not a criminal offence: not only was it very hard to demonstrate the individual culpability of rioters, but proving secret society members were plotting against the state, as was also required for a successful prosecution under the French penal code, was virtually impossible. Thus, should the courts actually sentence arrested rioters the penalties levied bore no relationship to “the seriousness of the totality of the facts”, as the Interior Director explained in an early 1881 report to Governor Le Myre de Vilers, the first civilian to hold that office.<sup>133</sup> Administrative measures remained the only sure weapons in the government’s arsenal. Consequently, Sóc Trăng Inspector de Sainteny asked the Interior Director to invoke the collective responsibility of congregations, as legally enforceable under administrative orders of 5 October 1871 and 24 November 1874, and to fine congregations according to the number of members in their registers.<sup>134</sup> Almost all those arrested had been Teochiu, but the wall of silence that confronted any inquiry made it impossible to gather adequate proof against any individual. Nevertheless, the inspector believed that the general culpability of local Teochiu was obvious, so they should collectively pay for their members’ misbehaviour. De Sainteny proposed the following fines on the eight Sóc Trăng Teochiu congregations, whose amounts Le Myre duly approved by an administrative order dated 10 January 1881:<sup>135</sup>

1. Soctrang (2,500 members)	5,000 francs
2. Baclieu (1,500)	3,000 fr.
3. Bayxau (1,100)	2,200 fr
4. Trapho ( 260)	520 fr
5. Bothao ( 320)	440 fr
6. Laitham ( 370)	740 fr
7. Rachgia ( 110)	220 fr
8. Langgiai ( 130)	260 fr.

Despite this new measure, secret society agitation persisted undeterred in 1881. In early May, when the French realised attempts were being made to involve local Cantonese, the second largest dialect group in the area, the administrator successfully sought expulsion orders against twenty-five Chinese affiliates. At this juncture, a decree of 25 May extended the *indigénat* to Cochinchina. This extensive set of administrative disciplinary powers, originally devised in 1830s Algeria, criminalised a huge array of minor actions. It also greatly extended the governor’s powers over foreign Asians deemed to be engaged in rebellion or violent subversion, from simple expulsion to internment, with the possibility of

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133. DirInt to GovCC, only dated Jan 1881, in Ibid.

134. Sainteny to DirInt, 27 Dec 1880, in Ibid.

135. Soctrang administrative inquiry, 28 Dec 1880, and approval of the order, in Ibid.

sequestration of personal property, followed by expulsion. These new powers seem not to have been used immediately, as offenders arrested in June and July were simply expelled, just as a steady trickle of Tiandihui members had been since about 1876. After the mid-1881 expulsions no more incident reports appear in the archives until a major eruption in December that required a gunboat's intervention. In early 1882, however, with the opium farm now defunct, a new round of violence struck Sóc Trăng. Once more, the administration struggled to secure legal convictions of those arrested. In the first three months, 345 rioters were taken into custody, mostly Chinese but also some Vietnamese and Khmer, of whom only fifty-five were convicted. The toughest custodial sentences, of fifteen days, went to the owners of twenty-two junks whose crews had been involved in a melee. Otherwise, a mere seventeen brawlers were imprisoned, with sentences of no more than three to five days, while the others who were convicted escaped with small fines.<sup>136</sup> When an angry and overstretched Inspector Villard berated the heads of the local Teochiu congregations for their negligence and lack of authority after yet another serious brawl in April 1882, one man was stung into responding in kind: "These Chinese aren't afraid of anything," he said. "They know they can acquit [whatever they do] by a few days in prison and a few piastres fine."<sup>137</sup> In other words, the colonial administration was equally failing to exercise any real authority over the situation, just like the congregation heads. But this riposte is interesting for another reason. In my view it is about as close as any leading Teochiu in Sóc Trăng would have come to disclaiming any responsibility for the unrest as well, hinting that men from outside the area were the effective instigators and leaders of the agitation.

With reports of Tiandihui activity spreading to neighbouring Cần Thơ, and Villard apparently incapable of stopping Chinese gangs of up to 100 men from plundering freely and from recruiting new secret society affiliates among local people, Interior Director Béliard twice wrote to Governor Le Myre about the worrying political dimension these activities were developing. For him, this secret society rivalry, whose motives were unknown, was now assuming the character of "armed, open revolt". He consequently asked that the Thiên Địa Hội and any propaganda in its favour be banned, and for Sóc Trăng to be warned that if recruiting among local peoples did not cease the governor might resort to his special powers of detention and sequestration, rather than the simple administrative expulsion utilised to date.<sup>138</sup> Le Myre demurred, wanting to assess the situation in person before agreeing to apply extraordinary measures.

In early June, the governor spent several days in Sóc Trăng. What he experienced there, including his own failed attempts to interrogate highly evasive Tiandihui prisoners, convinced Le Myre that decisive action was necessary. On his return, the governor-in-council approved sentences of one year's detention on the prison island of Poulo Condore, followed by expulsion, for four Sóc Trăng Teochiu affiliates, among them the men whom Le Myre had vainly attempted to question. Two of them also had their property sequestered. The council then debated and agreed draft orders that collectively charged to the cost of six Teochui congregations—three in Sóc Trăng and three outside it (Chợ Lớn, Saigon, and Cần Thơ)—the funds needed to pay for special police units to patrol the most troubled areas. For Sóc Trăng alone, the new thirty man force was to cost 3,600 piastres annually, an amount that almost doubled the capitation tax burden for local Teochiu who were mainly agriculturalists.

With sequestration, which put personal wealth at risk for the first time, the administration had finally found an appropriately damaging weapon; just weeks after this sentence was published, Teochui solidarity in Chợ Lớn crumbled. The congregation

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136. Villard to DirInt, 14 Jan 1882. Goucoch, 1A22/045 (1)

137. Villard to DirInt, 26 Ap 1882. Goucoch, 1A.22/044.

138. DirInt to GovCC, draft report of May 1882, in *Ibid.*

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requested the government expel Tran Lap Vinh, an active Ngãi Hòa affiliate who lived in the kongsi house, where wounded members recuperated after brawling with their rivals, and who had been going about demanding contributions towards the land tax owed on it. The congregation wanted him gone, and his expulsion gave Le Myre the satisfaction of sequestering the kongsi house as well.<sup>139</sup> In July three more Teochiu were sentenced to expulsion after detention on Poulo Condore, again with their property sequestered.<sup>140</sup> With this renewed show of administrative resolve, the agitation in Sóc Trăng abated. After its most troubled districts were excised to form part of Bạc Liêu Province late in 1882, Sóc Trăng became so calm that the special police force was abolished from January 1883,<sup>141</sup> no doubt to the great relief of those paying its bills.

#### **The Aftermath of the Unrest**

In the aftermath of these events, French officials sought to understand what had been happening. Explanations varied depending on circumstances, personal prejudices, and on their audience. Internally, the most puzzling aspect had been the Thiên Địa Hội recruitment of local people, since all colonial information until then had caused the French to believe the Heaven and Earth Society was an exclusively Chinese association.<sup>142</sup> When addressed to the ministry in Paris, explanations varied from the simplistic—like Le Myre's assertion that Teochiu were more or less all thieves, and that his stiff monetary "contributions" had stopped the unrest in its tracks<sup>143</sup>—to what we would call spin-doctoring today, with Béalial informing the ministry that the Tiandihui was "becoming a sort of Asiatic Internationale, seeking its members from among the Annamites and Cambodians." Béalial also blamed everything on the Teochiu alone, claiming the "near totality" of them were Thiên Địa Hội affiliates because their negligent congregation leaders admitted anyone who turned up, including men fleeing China or being expelled from surrounding colonies.<sup>144</sup>

The notion of an Asian Internationale apparently caught the ministry's imagination: later that year Le Myre's replacement, Governor Thomson, was explicitly warned to be on guard against "the Society of Heaven and Earth [which] probably inspired by its directing committee in Canton, will start attempts at recruiting among Annamites".<sup>145</sup> Even retrospective fears of Huế court involvement briefly flourished in mid-1883, when evidence emerged of Tiandihui links with the Nguyễn court after a Cochinchina-based member of the queen mother's family was arrested in Saigon carrying a Tiandihui missive to the head of the Hainan congregation, himself a Ngãi Hưng member. An official investigation led to the expulsion of the Vietnamese consuls who had sheltered the courier. It also caused the Interior Director to cast a new light on the Sóc Trăng troubles, which now appeared the result of "an agreement between [the Heaven and Earth Society] and the court of Huế".<sup>146</sup> By the time Governor Thomson wrote to Paris, this hypothesis had become fact: the secret societies, he averred, "under the pretext of religion or charity, pursue a well-defined political aim: the overthrow of our domination".<sup>147</sup>

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139. Police to Chợ Lớn mayor, 6 July 1882, and report to GovCC, 12 July 1882, both Goucoch 1A.22/044.

140. See the administrative enquiry of 19 June and order of 11 July 1882 to detain, and then expel 3 men, and sequester their property, in *Ibid*.

141. DirInt to GovCC, 13 Dec 1882, Goucoch, 1A.22/045 (2).

142. See in particular two reports from DirInt to GovCC, both May 1882, in Goucoch, 1A.22/044.

143. See Le Myre's letter to the Paris ministry, 19 June 1882, CAOM, Indochine NF, 31449.

144. DirInt to Paris, 17 June 1882, Goucoch, 1A.15/155 (17).

145. Minister's undated orders to the new GovCC, 1882, COAM, Indochine AF, A 11 (6), c. 3.

146. Undated report, DirInt to GovCC, CAOM, Indochine NF, 31446.

147. Report from GovCC to ministry, 29 June 1883, in *Ibid*. Thomson strongly advocated war with Huế and it probably influenced his remarks.

Yet all of this political supposition seems a long way from events on the ground, either during or after the unrest. Instead, what the archival evidence most suggests to me is an unusually intense example of rival Tiandihui groups engaged in a turf war to control the most populous Chinese area outside of Saigon—Chợ Lớn, a place which was ideally suited to smuggling and where historically close links existed between the indigenous population, especially the Khmer, and Chinese settlers. In other words, it ticked all the boxes for a successful smuggling base. The main goal of the newcomers here, the Ngã Hòa, was to expand their membership territorially: the more local members the group enrolled, in particular the more village notables or entire villages that joined, the greater its security of operations on communal territory and the less chance of its being denounced, and, indeed, the more cash contributions it might squeeze from its new sworn brothers. Once protected by secret society membership, new affiliates could soon recoup their costs by plundering others at will, since it was well known that the under-resourced administration was unable to police an area whose forests and waterways offered such ease of escape.<sup>148</sup> If the Tiandihui was not new to Sóc Trăng, such bitter rivalry between the Ngã Hưng and the Ngã Hòa certainly was. The only motive that can adequately account for it at the time was the desire of Ngã Hòa factional bosses in Chợ Lớn, most likely led by Ban Hap, to control Sóc Trăng as a base for lucrative future opium smuggling, both for its own population and for the Chinese of western Cochinchina generally.

The rapid calming of the situation from mid-1882 may have partly reflected the impact of the collective fines, as Le Myre argued; but if my analysis is accurate, the threat of property sequestration would have been far more worrying to the real instigators of the unrest back in Chợ Lớn. By mid-1882, the slightest trace of material evidence linking an individual to the Heaven and Earth Society could cause imprisonment and sequestration followed by expulsion. This serious new penalty made the continuation of disturbances in Sóc Trăng a potential risk for men in Chợ Lớn as well, something that the police search of the home of a man of Yo Seng Ton's stature must have made all too obvious. By that time, of course, it is possible that the underlying motives driving continued unrest no longer existed, and that the Ngã Hòa was in the process of successfully imposing a local *modus vivendi* in Sóc Trăng after Ngã Hưng leaders (and a number of affiliates) reportedly fled upriver to Cambodia in mid-1882.<sup>149</sup> That calm returned equally suddenly to Baclieu, which had been a hotbed of unrest in early 1882, also supports this hypothesis. In 1884, no acts of Chinese piracy had been reported in that province for nearly two years, according to Inspector Lamothe-Cannier. Significantly, the administrator added that, if the Heaven and Earth Society still persisted there, it was only “as an association of smugglers” because it was now “in the smuggling of opium that the Chinese seek the profits that piracy no longer procures for them”.<sup>150</sup> Unlike some others who occupied that post, Lamothe-Cannier had good relations with the local Chinese community, so his observation was probably well-founded. In any case, where Sóc Trăng is concerned the reality of significant opium smuggling in the early 1880s was also supported by objective evidence.

Table 7. Tax Yields from Opium sale in Sóc Trăng, 1882–86

1882	102,021 piastres.
1883	108,594 piastres.
1884	105,558 piastres.

148. Chinese awareness of this situation was one reason Sainteny said it was so hard for him to curb the unrest and stamp out piracy in 1880. See his letter to Dirlnt, 27 Dec 1880, Goucoch 1A22/044.

149. As reported by Protectorate Representative Fourès to GovCC, 9 July 1883, CAOM, Indochine, FA 11972.

150. Letter to Dirlnt, 30 Oct 1884, Goucoch, 1A12/126 (1-41).

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1885	113,915 piastres.
1886	186,639 piastres.

Source: "Rapport sur la situation générale de l'Arrondissement de Soctrang, 1886,"  
Goucoch 1A15/155 (1–37)

Official revenue information from Sóc Trăng (to my current knowledge, none is extant for Bạc Liêu) proves how valuable the control of contraband opium sales actually was here after the *régie* was set up. For most of the early 1880s, *régie* returns remained very poor in this province, as Table 7 reveals. In an 1886 report, Administrator Granier noted that Sóc Trăng accounted for one-fifteenth of the colony's opium receipts, but one-twelfth of its total excise on rice wine. The 1886 census had found 4,159 Chinese in this province out of a colony-wide total of 50,173. On official figures, therefore, 8.25 percent of the known Chinese population lived in Sóc Trăng; but in 1886 they had only contributed 6.5 percent of the official opium revenue, and that in an exceptional year when the total opium revenue here had leapt by 73,000 piastres, or by nearly two-thirds of the previous highest return (113,915 piastres in 1885). These figures are very eloquent. They allow us to value the market for smuggled opium in Sóc Trăng alone in the first years of the *régie* at between fifty and sixty thousand piastres per annum, or even more. After subtracting operating costs, contraband profits might have rivalled those achieved here by Andrew Spooner when he controlled the opium farm. Thus the *régie*'s own figures conclusively demonstrate that the local consumption of smuggled opium alone—not to mention the opportunities Sóc Trăng afforded for its easy distribution by water to the thousands of Chinese resident in western Cochinchina—realised very high profits for the smugglers for several years after the secret society upsurge.

All the directors and chief shareholders of the Chinese opium syndicate, Ban Hap included, would have been well aware of the profits that Spooner's management of the revenue farm had generated in this Chinese dominated region in the mid-1870s. When it became clear that the opium farm was doomed—and in Ban Hap's case, when his attempt to expand into Hong Kong had failed—the chance to control such a lucrative source of income in such a poorly policed area would have become extremely attractive. For those "elder brothers" within the shadowy world of the Tiandihui, with a ready made band of followers willing to support them, it would have certainly been something worth fighting for.

The secret society upsurge in early 1880s Sóc Trăng was unique in its scope and organisation in the history of colonial Cochinchina: although archival documents continued to report on Chinese secret societies and their activities, nothing of this scale or intensity ever appeared again. In my view, this unique event arose from an equally unique set of circumstances—the replacement of the opium revenue farm by a government monopoly—which impacted negatively on the wealthiest Chinese in the colony at the same time that it created potentially important new commercial opportunities in the black economy for anyone who could control the best smuggling locations. The result was a public struggle between secret society groups over the key strategic base of Sóc Trăng. When this conflict was settled in favour of the Ngãi Hòa, peace returned to the region for years while the victors focused on reaping the benefits of their success in the lucrative smuggling and distribution of contraband opium.