

On Ethnic Relations and Integration: Vietnamese Perspectives on the Ethnic Chinese in Colonial Sài Gòn (1900–1940)

Yin Liang Li

Introduction

The ethnic Chinese in Hồ Chí Minh City, formerly known as Sài Gòn or Sài Gòn- Chợ Lớn, have been one of the largest and most prominent Chinese communities in Vietnam since their initial arrival to the southern region in the seventeenth century. During the French colonial period (1864- 1945), the Chinese constituted almost half of the city's total population and had strong control over various economic sectors, such as rice production and transportation. Their economic power was a source of contempt, fear, and admiration for the native Vietnamese community in the city, who at the time were experiencing a special situation where they lost their political control to the French and their economic dominance to the Chinese. During the early twentieth century (roughly 1900s-1940s), various Vietnamese publications, especially the press, adopted a negative perspective toward the Chinese that was both chauvinist and xenophobic. In 1924, Đào Trinh Nhất, a Northern Vietnamese intellectual who had just visited the southern metropolis of Sài Gòn - Chợ Lớn, wrote a controversial book that began as follows:

The South is the throat of our nation..., the work that our forebears who hundreds of years ago left as a heritage for their descendants today; we should not have let anyone breach our right to possess it.

Yet that heritage has been overtaken by over two hundred thousand Chinese, a people apt in colonization. Now they have become the owner of our commercial and technology sectors; ... they have taken away every single economic right and advantages while we allow them to oppress us... No! Our fate in the South, our future in the South, we could not possibly let them occupy us like this.¹

Historians studying Vietnamese intellectual and political history have evaluated the negative perspectives that the Vietnamese educated class expressed in political journalism, especially newspapers, as an expression of nationalism and anti-foreign sentiments. This hostile attitude from the Vietnamese community was correlated with the fact that the Chinese during this time were relatively segregated from the larger community with their own social and political system of governance. However, a deeper study of Vietnamese newspapers would show how their narratives were ambivalently mixed among antagonism, admiration, and even sympathy. Other literary sources such as popular literature also presented more moderate voices that took into consideration the contributions of the ethnic Chinese as a long-established immigrant-settler community in the southern region. This plurality of perspectives, as represented in Vietnamese newspapers and popular literature published in the first four decades of the twentieth centuries, demonstrated how the relationship between the two ethnic groups were influenced not just by colonial policy and ethnic nationalism but also individual economic or political motives.

This paper examines the portrayals of ethnic Chinese people in selected sources of

Vietnamese newspapers and popular literature written in the colonial period. Most of the publications were written in the new romanized Vietnamese script (*chữ Quốc ngữ*) and were published from the 1900s to 1940s. First, I will explain the historical background of Chinese migration and settlement in southern Vietnam and the context of Vietnamese intellectual and political history in the early twentieth century. Second, I examine the ambivalent anti-Chinese stance demonstrated in certain early twentieth century newspapers, including *Quốc dân diển đàn*, *Lục tỉnh tân văn*, *Đông Pháp thời báo*, and *Thần chung*. I will focus on how the political goals and affiliations of these newspapers impacted their views toward the Chinese and prove that they did not necessarily reflect hostile relations between the two communities.

Third, I will introduce sources in popular literature that exhibit a neutral perspective toward the ethnic Chinese. Works to be analysed are the lyrical gazette *Nam kỳ nhơn vật phong tục diển ca* by Nguyễn Liên Phong and selected novels of Hồ Biểu Chánh, an iconic figure in Southern Vietnamese literature before 1945. Because of the non-political nature of their works, these authors were more concerned about the culture, history, and day-to-day relationships between people in the community. Thus, their perspectives toward the Chinese were much more moderate and even positive.

By focusing on popular media and cultural sources such as newspapers and literature, this paper seeks to gain insights into the relationship between the ethnic Vietnamese and ethnic Chinese under the colonial context. Studying this crucial historical period also allows for greater understanding of the longer patterns of ethnic relations and ethnic integration in the society both in Vietnam and in Southeast Asia at large.

Historical context of the Chinese community and Vietnamese nationalism in colonial Sài Gòn

Before delving into Vietnamese perspectives toward the ethnic Chinese in colonial Sài Gòn, it is important to understand both the history of Chinese migration to the region as well as the history of Vietnamese intellectual and political history during this time. These historical contexts foreground the Vietnamese divergence of perspectives toward the Chinese, which is the main subject of this research study.

Long-term settlers or foreigners?

During the 1820s, Trịnh Hoài Đức, a Nguyễn-dynasty mandarin, wrote about a group of over 3000 political refugees who came to Vietnam via the port of Đà Nẵng in 1679. “These people claimed to be Ming people running away from China and had long sworn to be forever loyal with their country. But now the Ming dynasty has come to an end and they could not switch loyalty to the Qing. Thus they ran away to the Southern country [Việt Nam] asking to be accepted as commoners.”² That was among the first important historical records about the history of Chinese early migrants in Gia Định, a region later comprised of Sài Gòn - Chợ Lớn and its surrounding region. They were called “Minh Hương,” with “Minh” meaning “Ming” in Chinese and indicating their roots in the Ming dynasty in China. After several generations, the Minh Hương intermarried with local Vietnamese people. Granted by Nguyễn rulers to have full citizenship rights as the Vietnamese, the Minh Hương enjoyed the right to political participation, and many of them became prominent senior officials.³

From the Qing dynasty (1644-1912) to the Republican period (1912-1949), Chinese migrants to Vietnam retained their Chinese citizenship. Nguyễn policy under Minh Mạng indicated that this group could live in Vietnam and participate in the bangs for as long as they wanted, but they were overseas citizens and did not have any political rights.⁴ Under the French, the Chinese were further classified as “Asiatique Etrangers Assimiles” (assimilated foreign Asians); they also had to pay residence tax, frequently renewed their passport, and had no right to vote.⁵ During the 1930s, the Chinese government tried to negotiate with the French for more legal protection towards overseas Chinese, including a proposal to substitute the congregation system with representation by official Chinese embassies. However, they only succeeded in relieving the residence tax after the Nanking

Treaty in 1930.⁶ Immigrants of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were thus considered foreigners by both the French government and the Vietnamese community.⁷ However, the distinctions between Minh Hương and Thanh nhân could be very ambiguous. After 1885, the French revised their citizenship policy and gave the Minh Hương a choice to change their Vietnamese citizenship status to be Chinese citizens, French citizens in Asia, or citizens of a third country if they paid a fee. In 1933, all Minh Hương born from that year on were considered French citizens in Asia.⁸ These policies disrupted the identities of the Minh Hương and incorporated many of them into the later Chinese immigrant community.

Urban Vietnamese Nationalists in the Colonial Period

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the Vietnamese community in Sài Gòn - Chợ Lớn lived in an environment where they were the majority ethnic group but had relatively little political or economic power. Colonized by the French, Vietnamese people strived to regain their political independence and self-determination through different nationalist, anti-colonialist, and self-strengthening movements. In the twentieth century, these movements were mostly led by intellectuals who were frustrated that the Vietnamese were constrained not only by the French but also by the Chinese, who dominated various sectors of the economy. Maintaining that the Chinese took away the Vietnamese right to economic self-determination, Vietnamese intellectuals and elites adopted an especially anti-Chinese stance through various newspapers in early twentieth century colonial Sài Gòn. _____

Scholars on Vietnamese modern intellectual history have analyzed this xenophobic, anti-Chinese perspective in political newspapers with different perspectives. Micheline Lessard studies the anti-Chinese boycott of 1919 initiated by *La Tribune indigène*, a French-language newspaper, and demonstrates how the editors stirred economic nationalism by using xenophobic language toward the Chinese in order to advance their personal political and economic interests.⁹ In contrast, Sơn Nam, a Vietnamese writer who researches and writes extensively on the history and culture of South Vietnam, asserts that the Vietnamese attacks on the Chinese at this time did not indicate racial discrimination.¹⁰ Rather, they only criticized the Chinese as a socio-economic group exploiting the economy and preventing the Vietnamese from advancing forward.

Philippe Peycam in *The Birth of Vietnamese Political Journalism* further remarks that the Vietnamese admired and feared Chinese aggressive economic activities at the same time, and the anti-Chinese movements in general were an attempt to achieve mass mobilization, widespread

support and unity.¹¹ The intellectuals and elites also wished to portray the Vietnamese as “distinct from those of the Chinese and the French.”¹² In *Appetites and Aspirations in Vietnam*, Erica J. Peters also demonstrates how the Chinese were equally viewed both by the French colonial authorities and the native Vietnamese nationalists as “parasites” and “thieves,” since they not only took away economic opportunities but also native people by marrying Vietnamese women.¹³ However, Peters notes that this sentiment was influenced and intensified by the French, who wanted to create more divisions within the ruled colonial community and compete with the Chinese for economic dominance.¹⁴

Overall, the “foreigner” status of the Chinese, a result of disruptive citizenship policies, overshadowed their history of settlement and contributions to the development of the region. At the same time, the dominating anti-Chinese perspectives in newspapers also made scholars overlook other alternative perspectives exhibited in certain newspapers as well as in other types of media, such as literature. As discussed later in the paper, certain Vietnamese newspapers in various times expressed alternative attitudes toward the Chinese such as sympathy or admiration. Sources in literature further adopted a positive perspective toward the Chinese that recognized their long-term settlement and historical contributions and illustrated friendly relationships between normal Vietnamese and Chinese people on a day-to-day basis.

Ambivalent anti-Chinese stance in newspapers

In the 1910s, Vietnamese-owned newspapers began to expand with the rise of the new elite class.¹⁵ The owners and editors of these newspapers were Western-educated Vietnamese who sought to use newspapers “as a distinct political force that flourished within the constraints of the colonial legal framework.”¹⁶ With this particular goal, they looked upon the Chinese control of the economy and their community solidarity with fear, envy, and admiration.¹⁷ These views are particularly demonstrated through notable articles concerning the Chinese on four major newspapers – *Quốc dân diễn đàn*, *Lục tỉnh tân văn*, *Đông Pháp thời báo*, *Thần Chung*, – mostly in the 1910s-1920s. For this project, I pay particular attention to notable events that led to an increase of coverage on the Chinese: the anti-Chinese boycott in 1919 and Chinese demand to open an embassy in Indochina in 1929.

Quốc dân diễn đàn (National Forum): Anti-Chinese boycott of 1919

When Chinese shopkeepers raised the price of coffee in August 1919, it was *Quốc dân diễn đàn* and its French counterpart *La Tribune Indigène* (The Native Tribune) that spearheaded an anti-Chinese commercial boycott that was soon followed by other southern newspapers and spread nationwide. *Quốc dân diễn đàn* was established in October 1918 by Nguyễn Phú Khai, a French-educated intellectual with close ties to the colonial government, under an initiative of the French Governor-General Albert Saurrat.¹⁸ Because of this political affiliation, its perspectives toward the Chinese went hand in hand with the colonial agenda in making them the scapegoat for exploiting Vietnamese economy and highlighting colonial benevolence.¹⁹

Quốc dân diễn đàn had long warned the natives of Chinese economic power and economic aggression before the boycott took place. On March 31, 1919, the newspaper posted an article from a Chinese newspaper, *Huê kiều nhật báo*, which supposedly had claimed that Chinese commercial activities benefited instead of harming the economy. *Quốc dân diễn đàn* was enraged that the Chinese

“were not grateful” to the Vietnamese for allowing them to do business in Vietnam but instead “used disrespectful language to insult” the natives.²⁰ On June 2, 1919, it expressed frustration toward a government decision that delegated the Chamber of Chinese Commerce to determine who could export rice out of the quota allocated for the native “Asians”.²¹ The newspaper then continued to advocate for Vietnam unionization to compete against the Chinese while also took notice of how the Chinese united to boycott Japanese goods following the Japanese occupation of some territories in northeast China.²²

Between August 25 and late September of 1919, news about the boycott dominated every single page of *Quốc dân diễn đàn*. Half of the articles advocated for Vietnamese people to boycott Chinese goods in favor of Vietnamese products and encouraged Vietnamese businesses to compete with the Chinese, while the other half reported on how the boycott was occurring from region to region on a day-to-day basis. On September 8, it posted a letter sent from a Chinese (as it claimed) that was written with an arrogant and demeaning tone toward the Vietnamese for waging the boycott; the goal of this was for the Vietnamese to “carve into mind this outrageous insult.”²³

In October, the campaign seemed to have spread to the Central and the North. However, the movement did not go very far as the Governor General of Indochina decided to intervene at the end of 1919. It also failed because the majority of Vietnamese who belonged to the lower working class did not feel like the elite-initiated movement represented their interests; in addition, the Vietnamese intellectuals were also politically divided among themselves and did not unite to the end.²⁴

Lục tỉnh tân vǎn (The Six Provinces Gazette)

Lục tỉnh tân vǎn, another newspaper that was also close to the French government, also adopted a similar anti-Chinese view to *Quốc dân diễn đàn*, albeit in a much more volatile manner. In 1919, the newspaper joined in the anti-Chinese campaign spearheaded by *La Tribune indigène* and *Quốc dân diễn đàn*. On September 10, 1919, it bitterly denounced the Chinese *khách trú* (guest residents) for capitalizing on Vietnamese economy and looking down on the natives: “How ungrateful are these outrageous foreign residents sojourning here from abroad! We sympathized with their destitute situation and allowed them to stay here and do business, yet they never appreciate that and even dare to insult our race!” The newspaper further encouraged the people to “cut off all trade connections” with the Chinese and only trade with each other, so that “no one could look down on us [them] and money could circulate only on our [their] land.” It ended on a poem encouraging people to support unionizing and ousting the foreigners (Chinese and Indians). In another article published on the same issue, the newspaper compared the Vietnamese opposition to the Chinese to the French fight against the Germans in World War I. It stated: “We belong to a more superior race in Indochina and enjoy protection from the Great France; if we fail to overcome this challenge...are we not ashamed to face our ancestors and the Great France?”²⁵ The heavy pan-Vietnamese perspective reflected a strong race consciousness of an emerging nationalist movement that spread easily and dangerously especially when there was an available scapegoat to blame under colonial restraints.

The newspaper also criticized Vietnamese who did not follow the nationalist initiative. In October 1919, it reported on a Vietnamese lady who disregarded the nationalist initiative and still went back to support her favorite Chinese vendor to her Vietnamese neighbors’ dismay. When the

old lady went so far as to take care of the burial when the Chinese vendor died, the editor exclaimed: “If the dead Chin was brought back to China, I wonder if she would actually follow him as well!”²⁶

Lục tỉnh tân văn remained close and relatively dependent on the government at least until the late 1920s and early 1930s, as demonstrated through its support towards a government project, also known as the Saigon Port Monopoly Affair in 1923. This was a highly controversial case where the French governor wanted to give complete monopoly on commercial freights moving through the Saigon Port to a private consortium, which alarmed many Vietnamese, French liberals, and Chinese businessmen alike.²⁷ *Lục tỉnh tân văn* was among the few that supported the governor’s proposal and thus also spoke against Chinese interests.

Đông Pháp thời báo (Indochina Times)

Đông Pháp thời báo’s anti-Chinese stance was not as rigid as *Quốc dân diễn đàn* and was balanced with admiration as much as criticism. The newspaper, firstly, was launched in 1923 by Nguyễn Kim Đính, a successful businessman whose tactical relationship with the government allowed the paper to address social and political issues without being censored by the government. In 1925, Nguyễn Kim Đính decided to take a more nationalist and anti-government stance to “cater to the increasingly anti-government feelings among educated Vietnamese,” while also inviting Trần Huy Liệu as the main editor. Liệu took part in the anticolonial and nationalist movement by disregarding the legitimacy of the regime and looking up to revolutionary models in the world, especially Sun Yat-sen and Republican China.²⁸ The newspaper thus opposed the Chinese mainly to defend the economic rights of the natives and advocate for Vietnamese self-transformation. Although the anti-Chinese boycott of 1919 had already passed, the campaign to achieve economic self-determination for the Vietnamese persisted on *Đông Pháp thời báo* during the mid-1920s. On January 7, 1924, for example, the newspaper reported on a public land bidding project in Gò Công province, which restricted bidders to only Vietnamese and excluded the Indian as well as the Chinese. The newspaper considered it a rightful measure because “those lands were not contributed to the village by their ancestors, how can they be granted the right to inherit the lands.”²⁹ The article clearly showed satisfaction of a pan-Vietnamese initiative that finally tried to assert their economic rights and self-determination against foreigners’ monopoly.

In line with this nationalist self-strengthening narrative, various articles from *Đông Pháp thời báo* also implied that Vietnamese people should learn after the Chinese with regards to their rigorous economic endeavours and their community solidarity. In an article published in May 1923, the newspaper addressed the notorious gambling places operated by the Chinese and lamented on how the Chinese took away heaps of Vietnamese’s people money while also looking down on them.³⁰ However, the article seemed to show respect rather than denounce the Chinese for their solidarity and commitment in capitalizing and making money. In fact, its main objective was to criticize the “common ailment” of the Vietnamese who are not aware of national development and trade advantages, but instead are only preoccupied with short-term benefits and self-indulgence.

Thần Chung (The Morning Bell)

Launched in January 1929, *Thần Chung* was the reincarnation of *Đông pháp thời báo* after the latter newspaper changed ownership to Diệp Văn Kỳ in 1927.³¹ Kỳ was one of the few prominent

southern intellectuals well-trained in Vietnamese traditional studies and received higher education in France. In contrast with the entrepreneurial Nguyễn Kim Đính, Diệp Văn Kỳ had a clear oppositionist stance against the colonial government and strived to establish the newspaper as a political forum.³² They “did not aspire only to ‘defend’ Vietnamese interests but also to present a Vietnamese – albeit urban middle-class – worldview” with regards to domestic and international affairs.³³ This renewed agenda distinguished *Thần Chung* from other newspapers in earlier periods as it reported on the Chinese control the Vietnamese economy not to blame them but to provoke and criticize Vietnamese people for letting others taking advantage of their economic opportunities. On January 11, 1929, an article titled “Fellow citizens, have you seen this?” calculated the enormous amount of capital outflow that the Chinese took out of their economic activities in Vietnam as an alert to the Vietnamese audience.³⁴ Instead of denouncing Chinese businesses like *Quốc dân diển đàn* or *Lục tỉnh tân văn*, the article heavily criticized Vietnamese people for “making counterfeits and faking them instead of learning new technology, hasty for little profit in the immediate term instead of concerning about long-term advantages.”³⁵ Similarly, a follow-up article on February 5 noted that the Vietnamese were mainly to blame for letting foreigners taking advantage of them by consuming non-Vietnamese products.³⁶ Most notably, the newspaper acknowledged that there were many other groups of foreigners who “lived off on our blood and soil even more than the Chinese foreign residents.”³⁷

Going beyond Chinese control of the economy, *Thần Chung* was also concerned about the political affairs of the Chinese in Vietnam as the Republican government in China wanted to establish embassies in Indochina in 1929, mainly worrying about the consequences to Vietnamese people. In a series of articles published in early 1929, the chief editor Diệp Văn Kỳ discussed the difficulties of formalizing the status of overseas Chinese as they had been sojourning without legal recognition from their home country and had blended in native populations across Southeast Asia for a long time. On one hand, Kỳ voiced his nationalist stance by criticizing a suggestion to treat the Chinese like Vietnamese citizens, calling it “absurd” and warning the government not to “bother Vietnamese people with the consequences of this affair.”³⁸ On the other hand, Kỳ expressed sympathy toward the Chinese, saying that “we should be happy for the Chinese for finally having a representative embassy to defend their rights”.³⁹ The newspaper revisits this issue again in October 1929 with a revamped comparison between Vietnam and China: “The Chinese in our country suffers from some disadvantages but definitely not in their home country. They could do whatever they want and put up as many taxes and tariffs for imports as they are pleased.”⁴⁰ The newspaper at this point seemed to express admiration for China for being able to move on from their humiliating past and stand up against European imperialist powers, possibly reflecting on the Vietnamese aspiration to achieve self-determination.

Moderate perspectives in newspapers?

The brief survey of major newspapers in the first few decades of the twentieth century demonstrated how nationalist sentiments and political agenda shaped Vietnamese perspectives toward Chinese people in Sài Gòn – Chợ Lớn and the southern region. But how did that influence reflect the long-term perspectives and relationships between the two communities? There are two variables to consider: whether anti-Chinese narratives persisted throughout the whole period, and whether there were also hints of alternative positive or moderate viewpoints established on the

newspapers.

Because each of the newspapers listed above varied in terms of political ideology and affiliation throughout time, their anti-Chinese perspectives also varied. *Quốc dân diễn đàn* adopted an anti-Chinese stance in order to advance their *franco-annamite collaboration* position. As a sister version of *La Tribune Indigène*, one might also suspect that the editors for this newspaper only provoked economic nationalism to advance their private interests in expanding economic rights for Vietnamese business elites to compete against Chinese and French businesses.⁴¹ *Lục tỉnh tân văn* followed the anti-Chinese narrative so as to secure its own existence from government scrutiny. Their claim to defend Vietnamese economic privileges by targeting the Chinese served the colonial government well to have a scapegoat for colonial exploitation. As an opposition newspaper, *Đông Pháp thời báo* was mainly concerned with achieving economic self-determination for the Vietnamese; it opposed Chinese control on the economy and their illicit activities, but also admired them and wished that Vietnamese people could follow their example. With an even more anti-government perspective, *Thần Chung* expressed admiration toward both the Chinese and China, implying their wish to unite the people and gain independence from foreign influence like the Republic of China did.

However, the adopted hostile narratives were not persistent throughout time. Although relatively few, there were certain occasions when the newspapers did not have explicitly negative views, but held even positive ones. *Đông Pháp thời báo*, for example, reported favorably on the well-known Chinese millionaire Tja Ma-yen, who donated money to a charity when his daughter got married.⁴² Another *Đông Pháp thời báo* article in February 1925 reported on the Chinese community donating to help rebuild the neighborhood after an arson attack.⁴³ There were also certain periods where coverage on the Chinese was extremely rare, such as *Lục tỉnh tân văn* during the 1930s. There are many possible explanations to this. Firstly, it could be that there was no interest to report on the Chinese community or that the reporters were more focused on other affairs. This is quite unlikely because most of the time these newspapers would catch on trivial matters such as a Chinese committing suicide or a heated argument between two Chinese men. Secondly, it could be that the reporters were not aware that the parties involved in an incident were Chinese; and thirdly, the reporters might be aware of the ethnicity but did not think it was important to mention. Both of these latter scenarios implied that Chinese people blended in and lived among the Vietnamese more closely than most scholars had evaluated. For the third scenario, it might even signify that even the nationalist intellectual-journalists were only mindful of ethnicity when writing on political and economic matters regarding Vietnamese interests. Hostile newspaper narratives also might not have fully represented ethnic relationships in individual cases. For the unique case of the Vietnamese lady who “defied” her Vietnamese community that *Lục tỉnh tân văn* reported in part 4, we could see that not every Vietnamese was influenced by the xenophobic anti-Chinese sentiments. Individual relationships and experience varied from person to person; not every Vietnamese was hostile to Chinese people and vice versa.

Another interesting facet of these newspapers is the fact that almost all of them featured advertisements that were, or possibly were, Chinese. *Thần Chung* in February 1929 had an advertisement from “The China Cinema” (Cinéma Trung Quốc), which frequently imported movies from Shanghai.⁴⁴ In May 1923, *Đông Pháp thời báo* had an advertisement from the “Chinese Tobacco Limited Corporation of Cochinchina” (Nam Kỳ Trung Huê Yên thảo hữu hạn công ti), a tobacco company with both Chinese and Vietnamese names for their products. Interestingly, this

advertisement was placed underneath another an advertisement from a Vietnamese oil company that stated: “Our products are good quality and cheaper than Chinese foreign-residents’ products,” which appealed to the nationalist self-strengthening project of the newspaper.⁴⁵ In the early 1930s, *Lục tỉnh tân văn* most significantly had various advertisements from major Chinese businesses such as the “Chinese Tobacco Limited Corporation of Cochinchina,” the “Nhị Thiên Đường” Chinese pharmacy in Chợ Lớn, along with other Chinese brands and miscellaneous products. Although advertisements did not reflect the newspapers’ perspectives, they undermined the strictly nationalist agenda of the newspapers to a certain degree. They might also imply the normal economic interactions between the Vietnamese and Chinese despite the heated political debate on the public forum.

Alternative Perspectives in Literature

In contrast to the negative sentiments in political journalism, many sources in Vietnamese modern literature published during the same period presented moderate to positive perspectives toward the Chinese. In fact, they even pictured cordial relationships between individuals from the Vietnamese and Chinese communities. This paper analyzes three works that best illustrated such examples. The authors of these works either came from the South or lived most of their lives in the South, which deeply influenced their writing identity as Southerners. They thus tried to capture the South in its integrity, which was a region where the Chinese had established a deep historical footprint and interacted closely with the Vietnamese.

Nam Kỳ phong tục nhân vật diển ca (A Narrative of Notable People and Culture in the South)

The first source, *Nam Kỳ phong tục nhân vật diển ca* (roughly translated as “A narrative of notable people and culture in the South”) was a widely consulted literary work that demonstrated Chinese historical presence in the South from the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries. Published in Sài Gòn in 1909, it was one of the first works written in romanized Vietnamese script (*chữ Quốc ngữ*) to illustrate the geographic conditions, culture, history and notable characters of the southern provinces. In the gazette, the South came alive as a multiethnic and culturally diverse environment. Chinese people appeared most prominently in the chapters on Sài Gòn and Chợ Lớn, which signified their important historical presence and contribution to the development of this region.

*During the past ten years, Chinese women have come so often
There is too much chaos in China, their people have to flee elsewhere
Crossing thousands of miles South, their frail figures willing to go
In Sài Gòn and Chợ Lớn, Chinese men and women make themselves at home...⁴⁶*

The passage above indicated how Chinese migration to Vietnam started to increase towards the turn of the century with some demographic differences.⁴⁷ Regarding this sudden increase in the foreign population, the author did not seem to be anxious but instead expressed sympathy towards these migrants who had to flee their home country and overcome a long and arduous journey to make a better life. In his chapter on Chợ Lớn, Nguyễn Liên Phong showed respect towards the populous Chinese community here for their successful enterprises, business ethics, and community

solidarity.⁴⁸ They treated each other with trust, helped each other regardless of class differences, and cooperated to create success. In contrast, the author criticized his own Vietnamese people for being too distrustful of each other and envious of others getting ahead of them such that they fail to work together like the Chinese.⁴⁹

Nguyễn Liên Phong also showed interest toward Chinese culture, religions and their professions in both Sài Gòn and Chợ Lớn. Firstly, he spoke of how the Chinese were especially keen on religious festivities and had several cultural celebrations such as the Qixi Festival, Mid-Autumn Festival, Qing Ming Festival, etc.⁵⁰ Phong appreciated the magnificence of Chinese temples such as “chùa Ông Bồn,” “Hà Chương Hội quán,” “Ôn Lăng,” “Thất phủ” and introduced prominent gods and deities such as Guangong and Tianhou to his readers. He regarded their devotion as a unique characteristic of Chinese culture and praised their faithfulness.⁵¹ With regards to their professions, Nguyễn Liên Phong positively noted how they were seasoned restaurateurs, “witty” (*khôn ngoan*) traders or “skilled” (*khéo lanh*) craftsmen.⁵² Lương Minh ký, a Chinese medicine practitioner, was noted as a gifted doctor who “brought to Vietnam miraculous cures.”⁵³ It is worth noting the author frequently switched back and forth from talking about the Chinese in particular to referring to the residents of Sài Gòn - Chợ Lớn in general. For instance, Vietnamese opera and Cantonese opera troupes (*bạn Nam bạn Quảng*) appeared together as a favorite form of entertainment for everyone living in both places.⁵⁴

Nguyễn Liên Phong’s animated illustrations of the Chinese in *Nam Kỳ phong tục nhơn vật diển ca* could be said to be a blend of sympathy, appreciation, and admiration. He understood their hardships as an immigrant community, praised their rich cultural heritage and traditions, and admired their successful entrepreneurship as well as communal unity. Switching constantly between specific narratives about the Chinese and general narratives about residents of Sài Gòn - Chợ Lớn, Nguyễn Liên Phong gave an impression that the Chinese were inclusive instead of separated from the community and their unique customs were a part of the cultural diversity of the twin cities.

Hồ Biểu Chánh’s novels

Hồ Biểu Chánh, a prominent figure in modern Vietnamese literature in the South, also adopted a friendly attitude toward the ethnic Chinese in his novels, albeit with a mindset that the Chinese were still foreign. Out of his many novels, *Ai làm được* (1912) and *Chúa tàu Kim Quy* (1923) stood out as notable works that feature Chinese characters and illustrate the relationships and interactions among Vietnamese and Chinese people both in the countryside and in Sài Gòn.

Ai làm được (The capable one) tells the story of an upper-class family in Cà Mau, centering on Bạch Khiếu Nhân, senior head of the family, his granddaughter Bạch Tuyết, her husband Phan Chí Đại. Throughout the novel, there are three notable Chinese characters that assume minor roles but who are still important to the story’s development. The first character, chú Lý (Mr. Lý), is the typical portrayal of a Chinese who owns an eatery: he greets and treats his customers with hospitality, and most importantly speaks Vietnamese with a Chinese accent. He is addressed to as “chú,” an informal but relatively respectful pronoun to call a seller, a role widely taken by the Chinese in Vietnam.⁵⁵ When Bạch Khiếu Nhân talks to chú Lý, he also adopts a Chinese accent and uses Chinese-language pronouns (“nị,” “kị”).⁵⁶ This signifies the multi-ethnic culture of the South where the Vietnamese and Chinese had been living together for a long time and had adopted each other’s culture, including languages. The friendly and casual interactions between chú Lý and Bạch Khiếu

Nhàn also show how members from each community treated each other with mutual respect and cordiality.

The second Chinese character that appears in the story is called *chệt Xôn*. “Chệt” is the syllabic equivalence of “chú” in Teochew dialect, which Vietnamese adopted to call the Chinese because the first wave of Chinese migrants were mostly Teochew.⁵⁷ In later periods, the pronoun “chệt” was used in a derogatory way toward the Chinese, which was true in this case. This person is a local rice seller who lets Phan Chí Đại buy rice in exchange for a favor, but is also very aggressive when Phan Chí Đại fails to perform the agreement. Chệt Xôn seems to be the stereotypical Chinese living in the city: he has a thick Chinese accent, and he is a microbusiness owner who flexibly allows customers to buy goods without paying upfront; however, the customer has to pay back one way or another and there is no way they could escape the responsibility.⁵⁸

The last Chinese character in the novel, Lâm Liễn Thành, is a rich Hainanese merchant who ships dried fish, coal, and rice between Vietnam and other major trading hubs such as Hong Kong or Thailand. Contrary to most stereotypes of Chinese people like chú Lý or chệt Xôn, Thành uses proper Vietnamese without an accent, perhaps because he belongs to the upper class that gets to travel more and obtains a better education. An acquaintance of Bạch Khiếu Nhân, Thành discusses with Nhân that he needs a reliable partner to help his new pearl trading business in the Indian Ocean. Nhân immediately recommends Phan Chí Đại, who comes back at the end of the story as a successful merchant. In contrast to other minor characters, Thành is the character who provides the life-changing opportunity for the protagonists and helps them break out of their struggles. Lâm Liễn Thành is referred to in the third person as “anh ta,” a commonly used Vietnamese pronoun for “him” not specific to any ethnic group, contrasting with the informal and slightly derogatory pronoun “chệt”.

The second novel, *Chúa tàu Kim Quy* (Lord of the Kim Quy), features several Chinese characters and assigns them significant roles that are central to the development of the story.⁵⁹ Inspired by Alexandre Dumas’s *The Count of Monte Cristo*, *Chúa tàu Kim Quy* tells the story of Lê Thủ Nghĩa, a poor farmer who is wrongly convicted of being a Catholic and had to serve a lifelong sentence. During his time in prison, he meets a Cantonese “khách trú” (guest resident), Mạc Tiển, who is also wrongly convicted of sailing illegally in Vietnamese waters by the local government. Mạc Tiển teaches Thủ Nghĩa Cantonese and reveals that he used to be a rich merchant and hid a treasure on Kim Quy Island. Mạc Tiển dies after a serious disease, but Thủ Nghĩa breaks out of prison and embarks on a journey to fulfill Mạc Tiển’s death wish by retrieving the treasure and giving it to his family members in China. Thanks to the treasures, Thủ Nghĩa covers as a Chinese merchant and strives to help his family members as well as to get revenge on his nemesis Trần Tấn Thân, the evil landlord who got him into jail and destroyed his family.

Mạc Tiển, the original “lord of the Kim Quy,” is thus the most important Chinese character who brings the life-changing opportunity to the Vietnamese protagonist. He is portrayed as the descendant of general Mạc Cửu, a real historical figure of Minh Hương descent who contributed greatly to the settlement of South Vietnam in the eighteenth century.⁶⁰ Mạc Tiển was born in Vietnam but spent most of his adulthood in China, thus having a Chinese accent when speaking Vietnamese. From the Vietnamese perspective (of the author and of the Vietnamese characters in the story), Mạc Tiển represents a case where Minh Hương and Thanh nhân identities converge and become indistinguishable. While the author in this case recognized the long-term, continuous presence of the Chinese in southern Vietnam, he was also mindful of their foreign origins. This

sentiment is persistent through Thủ Nghĩa's dilemma when he has to adopt a "foreign" identity (of being Chinese) and therefore is unable to express his Vietnamese self.

The second most notable Chinese character is Trần Mừng, who later becomes Thủ Nghĩa's loyal friend and sidekick. Like Thủ Nghĩa, Trần Mừng is also a victim of Trần Tấn Thân, who tricks him and his brother into giving him all of their earnings from trading trips. Sympathizing with Trần Mừng's situation, Thủ Nghĩa under his new identity as a Chinese merchant helps Trần Mừng pay all his debt and offers to take him in as an assistant on his ship. Trần Mừng soon proves to be a faithful companion who helps Thủ Nghĩa manage his business, settle issues with his family, and finally, bring Trần Tấn Thân to justice.

Chúa tàu Kim Quy not only depicts the Chinese in Vietnam in a positive light but also illustrates Chinese - Vietnamese relationships as mutually cordial. Trần Mừng and Mạc Tiến are both close friends of Thủ Nghĩa and treat him with trust and genuineness. One of the links bridging the gap between Thủ Nghĩa and these two Chinese characters is probably Thủ Nghĩa's ability to speak and act like a Chinese. When Thủ Nghĩa dresses and behaves as a Chinese to carry transport the treasures from Kim Quy Island, not only the Chinese but also the Vietnamese believe that he is truly a Cantonese (chapter 6). His fluid cover as a Minh Hương allows him to blend in easily within both the Vietnamese and Chinese communities. The case of Thủ Nghĩa suggests that although the Chinese and Vietnamese had certain cultural differences, the barriers were not difficult to break down. Given how both communities readily adopted each other's culture and language, it is possible that their interactions in daily life were not only close but also not affected by ethnic or cultural differences.

Conclusion

Vietnamese perspectives toward the Chinese community living in Sài Gòn - Chợ Lớn varied greatly in early modern Vietnamese literature and newspapers. Journalists criticized the Chinese for their aggressive hold on the economy because of their political or economic agenda and interests.. However, their anti-Chinese stance were expressed differently due to their dissimilar political motivations, and there remained circumstances where their perspectives were not as hostile and even became mixed with sympathy and admiration. In contrast, writers of popular literature and general gazettes such as Hồ Biểu Chánh and Nguyễn Liên Phong had moderate or even positive perspectives toward the Chinese as they regarded them as part of the region's history and culture. Nguyễn Liên Phong admired the rich culture, business ethics, and community solidarity of the Chinese, while Hồ Biểu Chánh demonstrated the fluidity between Chinese and Vietnamese identities as well as the close relationships between the two communities.

The main factor leading to the divergence in perspective was the political goal in spreading Vietnamese ethnic nationalism, which emerged under the constraint of colonialism. Pro-French or government-dependent newspapers like *Quốc dân diển đàn* and *Lục tỉnh tân văn* attacked the Chinese in order to make them the scapegoat of blame for colonial exploitation. However, opposition and anti-colonial newspapers like *Đông Pháp thời báo* and *Thần chung* viewed the Chinese with both fear and admiration, illustrating their economic power mainly to alert and mobilize Vietnamese people. The larger political and historical context of the Asia-Pacific region must also be taken into consideration. China, as the first country to wage a successful revolution and establish their independence against imperialist power, was very much a source of inspiration for nationalists in

most of colonized Southeast Asia. Their sympathy with China and the interactions between China and France had a certain influence on their views toward the Chinese living in Vietnam, especially through the debate over a Chinese embassy in 1929.

In contrast, because of the generally non-political nature of their works, writers like Hồ Biểu Chánh and Nguyễn Liên Phong were more concerned with the everyday life, culture, and interactions among people in the society, which also included the Chinese. This was not to say that they were not nationalists and that nationalism did not affect their description of Chinese people and Vietnamese-Chinese relationships. Nguyễn Liên Phong, to a certain extent, was similar to journalists from *Đông Pháp thời báo* and *Thần chung* when he praised the Chinese community's business ethics and solidarity and criticized his native community for not having those virtues. In Hồ Biểu Chánh's *Chúa tàu Kim Quy*, the protagonist's dilemma in dressing up as a Chinese but refusal to define himself as one presented a situation where although Chinese and Vietnamese interactions were close and members of each community could easily blend in one another, their perceived ethnic difference and consciousness prevailed over all. This reflected the dilemma of the author himself, who recognized and appreciated Chinese influence on Vietnamese culture, but also acutely protective of the native's ethnic and cultural identity.

What can we conclude from these complex dynamics about the relationship between the Vietnamese and Chinese communities in Sài Gòn - Chợ Lớn or the South as well as Chinese integration during the early twentieth century? For once, neither perspectives in popular literature nor newspapers should be regarded as absolutely true and representative. Although the authors of these sources strived to represent public interests and public voices, they came from the elite or educated class and thus had different priorities and outlook than most other people in the society. However, we could conclude that the anti-Chinese stance and hostility toward the Chinese were only a result of ethnic nationalism and colonization, as the native Vietnamese tried to find the cause and solution for their loss of control and self-determination over their economic and political fate. The actual relationship between the Vietnamese and Chinese on a day-to-day basis, at least without external political influences, could be much more moderate due to their long history of mutual habitation and cultural closeness in the South. It was also likely that the relationship and perspective would vary on the individual basis, depending on their experience with Chinese people or how much they were influenced by external views such as newspapers.

The variance also applied to the degree of integration for the ethnic Chinese in Vietnam. Certain Chinese businesses such as those with advertisements featured on Vietnamese newspapers showed a high degree of willingness and flexibility when it came to integrating and accepting Vietnamese norms. On the other hand, their rigid segregation from the society as a community also made it difficult for generalized differences to be set aside on the macro level for both the Vietnamese and Chinese sides. There were still a lot of differences and misunderstandings between the two communities, especially when taking into account foreign relations between Vietnam and China. Through my examination of Vietnamese newspapers, although their perspectives on the ethnic Chinese were largely negative, they often regarded China as an important power that had made substantial progress in building self-determination against the ambitions and domination European colonial powers. This positive position toward China was particularly more definitive in opposition newspapers such as *Thần Chung* and *Đông Pháp thời báo*, which also showed admiration for the ethnic Chinese in their own community. Although the editors usually mentioned China separately from the ethnic Chinese, this suggests a possible new ground of research on how the Vietnamese views

on China affected their views on the Vietnamese Chinese community.

The finding of this project is also relevant to the relationship between the Vietnamese and the Chinese today in Vietnam, as tensions between Vietnam and China increase in recent years. Despite decades of regime change and revamped government policies trying to integrate the ethnic Chinese into the society, there remains uneasy feelings toward the ethnic Chinese as Vietnamese people' views toward China deteriorate. In addition, the process of integration and assimilation required not only the Chinese to adopt Vietnamese identity, language and custom, but also for the Vietnamese to accept Chinese culture and tradition as part of their nation. The questions and issues raised from this project suggest the need for more comparison studies for ethnic Chinese communities in other region in order to fully grasp the dynamic influence and interaction between the immigrant and host communities.

Notes

¹ Đào Trinh Nhất, *Thế lực Khách trú và vấn đề di dân vào Nam Kỳ* (Hà Nội: Thụy Kỳ), 1924.

² Trịnh Hoài Đức, *Gia Định thành thông chí*, ed. Lý Việt Dũng (Hà Nội: Tổng hợp Đồng Nai, 2006).

³ Ibid, 117. Choi Byung Wook, "The Nguyen Dynasty's policy toward Chinese on the water frontier in the first half of the nineteenth century," in *Water frontier: commerce and the Chinese in the Lower Mekong Region, 1750-1880*, ed. Nola Cooke and Li Tana, (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 92.

⁴ Ibid., 25.

⁵ Ibid., 26.

⁶ Nguyễn Cẩm Thúy et al., *Định cư của người Hoa trên đất Nam bộ (từ thế kỷ XVII đến năm 1945)*, (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Khoa học xã hội, 2000), 23.

⁷ Ibid., 30.

⁸ Trần, *Ethnic Chinese in the Vietnam's society*, 279.

⁹ Micheline Lessard, "Organisations-nous! Racial Antagonism and Vietnamese Economic Nationalism in the Early Twentieth Century," *French Colonial History* 8 (2007): 171-201.

¹⁰ Sơn Nam, *Phong trào Duy tân ở Bắc, Trung, Nam. Miền Nam đầu thế kỷ XX – Thiên Địa Hội và cuộc Minh tân*, (Hồ Chí Minh: Nhà xuất bản Trẻ, 2003), 226.

¹¹ Phillippe M. F. Peycam, *The Birth of Vietnamese Political Journalism: Saigon, 1916-1930*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

¹² Ibid, 87.

¹³ Erica J. Peters, *Appetites and Aspirations in Vietnam: Food and Drink in the Long Nineteenth Century*, (Plymouth: AltaMira Press, 2012), 125-148.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Peycam, *The Birth of Vietnamese Political Journalism*, 45, 51.

¹⁶ Ibid, 6.

¹⁷ Ibid, 28.

¹⁸ Ibid, 64-65.

¹⁹ Erica J. Peters, *Appetites and Aspirations in Vietnam*, 136.

²⁰ "Xin đồng bào mở mắt," *Quốc dân diễn đàn*, March 31, 1919.

²¹ "Buôn bán lúa gạo," *Quốc dân diễn đàn*, June 2, 1919.

- ²² “Vi sao mà Trung Hoa hờn Nhựt Bôn?,” *Quốc dân diển đàn*, July 1, 1919. “Tẩy chay hàng Nhựt Bôn: Chệt rất tự do,” *Quốc dân diển đàn*, July 28, 1919.
- ²³ “Những lời nên ghi,” *Quốc dân diển đàn*, September 8, 1919.
- ²⁴ Peycam, *The Birth of Vietnamese Political Journalism*, 86-87.
- ²⁵ “Cả tiếng kêu dân Nam Việt,” *Lục tỉnh tân văn*, September 10, 1919.
- ²⁶ “Hết lòng với chệt,” *Lục tỉnh tân văn*, October 24, 1919.
- ²⁷ Peycam, *The Birth of Vietnamese Political Journalism*, 116.
- ²⁸ *Ibid*, 145.
- ²⁹ “Lời cung tụng ông Hội Đồng Đào Văn Đính,” *Đông Pháp thời báo*, January 7, 1924.
- ³⁰ “Một bình chung,” *Đông Pháp thời báo*, May 7, 1923.
- ³¹ Peycam, *The Birth of Vietnamese Political Journalism*, 166-171.
- ³² *Ibid*.
- ³³ *Ibid*, 173.
- ³⁴ “Đồng bào ta đã thấy chưa?,” *Thần Chung*, January 11, 1929.
- ³⁵ *Ibid*.
- ³⁶ “Kinh tế với thanh niên,” *Thần Chung*, February 5, 1929.
- ³⁷ *Ibid*.
- ³⁸ “Vấn đề Hoa Kiều,” *Thần Chung*, February 25, 1929.
- ³⁹ “Nước Tàu xin đặt lãnh sự,” *Thần Chung*, January 26, 1929.
- ⁴⁰ “Ngoại giao Hoa-Việt,” *Thần Chung*, October 5, 1929.
- ⁴¹ As suggested earlier by Micheline Lessard, “Organisations-nous! Racial Antagonism and Vietnamese Economic Nationalism in the Early Twentieth Century.”
- ⁴² “Có lòng tốt,” *Đông Pháp thời báo*, February 13, 1924.
- ⁴³ “Cuộc hóa tai trong Chợ Lớn,” *Đông Pháp thời báo*, February 20, 1925.
- ⁴⁴ *Thần Chung*, February 2, 1929.
- ⁴⁵ *Đông Pháp thời báo*, May 4, 1923.
- ⁴⁶ Cao Tự Thành and Trương Ngọc Tường, *Nam Kỳ phong tục nhọt vật diển ca chú thích*, 181. Original: “Ước chừng hơn mười năm nay, đàn bà nước Chệt đổi thay qua thường Bên Tàu lắm lúc nhiều phương, Dân đi các nước tiêm phương ăn làm Tách muôn ngàn dặm sang Nam, Đem thân bồ liễu lòng cam xa với Sài Gòn - Chợ Lớn hai nơi, Chệt trai với xấp thành thơi ở trường...”
- ⁴⁷ According to Nguyễn Đình Phúc in “Vấn đề thống kê số lượng dân số người Hoa ở Việt Nam,” the total Chinese population in Vietnam doubled from 100,000 to over 200,000 in the 1900-1910 period. The Chinese population in the South also increased from about 40,000 to 115,000 from 1884 to 1910.
- ⁴⁸ Cao Tự Thành and Trương Ngọc Tường, *Nam Kỳ phong tục diển ca chú thích*, 206.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 208.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 181.
- ⁵¹ *Ibid*, 188 and 211.
- ⁵² *Ibid*, 188 and 212.
- ⁵³ *Ibid*, 215.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 190 and 212.
- ⁵⁵ Lâm Uyên Bá and Phan Thanh Bảo Trân, “Hiểu thêm về cách gọi người Hoa,” *Vietnamese Union of Science and Technology Association (VUSTA)*, accessed April 15, 2017, <http://www.vusta.vn/vi/news/Thong-tin-Su-kien-Thanh-tuu-KH-CN/Hieu-them-ve-cach-goi-nguoi-Hoa-7191.html>.
- ⁵⁶ Hồ Biểu Chánh, *Ai làm được* (Los Alamitos: Xuân Thu, 2000), 9.
- ⁵⁷ Lâm and Phan, “Hiểu thêm về cách gọi người Hoa.”

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