now the French colonial administration was highly sensitive to secret society activity. This was not only because of the Heaven and Earth Society banditry and violence that erupted in western Cochinchina (and Chợ Lớn to a much lesser extent), but also because it was concerned that the Heaven and Earth Society might stir up Chinese anti-colonial activity at a time when, from 1882, French forces were fighting Chinese troops and Black Flag irregulars during the colonial conquest of northern Vietnam. As early as 1881, the French consul in Bangkok had reported on similar fears of potential secret society political activity in Siam, where he estimated that up to 50,000 resident Chinese might be Tiandihui affiliates. Although fears calmed there in early 1882, after the violent incidents in 1881 involving Chinese petered out in the provinces, on 21 September 1882 the consul reported that King Chulalongkorn still publicly warned that Chinese organisations which exceeded their authorised mutual aid functions would not be tolerated in his country. This was a hollow threat, however, as Siam lacked a police force capable of acting against such well organised groups. Privately, the consul reported, the king and his ministers “greatly admire[d] the energetic procedures that the Governor of Cochinchina is using in regard to Chinese agitators and their followers, and would very much like to be able to follow his example”.

The Heaven and Earth Society was equally well established among Chinese in Cambodia at the time, where opportunities for lawless activity abounded. Armed robbery was almost a daily occurrence in the early 1880s there and Tiandihui affiliates were certainly involved in some of it. In May 1881, for instance, French Representative Fournès reported the arrest of twenty to thirty Chinese Heaven and Earth Society members, professional bandits who had come upriver from Soc Trăng one to two years earlier. However, secret society leaders here, unlike their counterparts in Cochinchina, might also be well known to the accommodating Khmer political elite. One of the wives of King Norodom’s favourite son, the third prince Duong Chak, was in fact a daughter of one of the principal Tiandihui leaders in Phnom Penh, while the prince was rumoured to be an affiliate himself. This Tiandihui leader, called Touk Hia Khai Boun or Lothia Sa in the archival documents, was very likely also the author of the letter below.

As 1883 progressed, French concerns about the Society in Cambodia deepened. In April Fournès reported the worrying (but no doubt exaggerated) news that all the several thousand Chinese agriculturalists settled along the Mekong River were members of this secret society. Then in May and June he was warned that agents of the Tiandihui were trying to enrol all the Chinese in Cambodia, and intimidating any who resisted. It was during
this period of growing anxiety that a Vietnamese interpreter called Chánh, a former employee of the protectorate in Phnom Penh, offered a Chinese letter to Fourès. The Frenchmen knew little of its background, only that Chánh claimed the Phnom Penh head of the Tiandihui, Tuk Hia Khai Boun, had offered him 45 piastres to return the letter, but that Chánh had preferred to give it to the Frenchman in case “it might compromise Lothia Sa” or other Chinese leaders.

Fourès only saw a summary translation of the letter, so all he really knew was that its author sought to end the destructive factional rivalry between Nghĩa Hưng and Nghĩa Hòa groups within the Tiandihui. In the circumstances of the time, this was enough to suggest to him that the attempted reconciliation arose from a desire for “common action, which it is easy to foresee as a rebellion”. At his next official audience with Norodom, Fourès therefore officially warned the king about Tuk Hia Khai Boun, whom, he said, was known to all Chinese in Cambodia as the head of the Heaven and Earth Society in the kingdom. Rumour had it, he added, that Khai Boun had collected over 4,000 piastres and raised more than 200 men to march through Laos to Tongking, to fight the French. While Fourès discounted any threat to French forces from this group, he did warn that such a large band might easily, and at any time, turn on Cambodia and pillage its provinces. The king had previously assured Fourès that Chinese secret society members were being hunted down, and a number of Chinese farmers had reportedly been subsequently manhandled by Cambodia officials; but when it came to this leading figure with royal family connections Norodom was evasive. While he and his officials all knew Tuk Hia Khai Boun was the Tiandihui leader in Phnom Penh, Norodom explained, none of the arrested Chinese had denounced him so that “it was not possible to have him arrested on simple suspicion alone”.

Fourès had no power to insist, and so had to accept this unconvincing response.

We do not know what—if anything—later happened to Tuk Hia Khai Boun. After this flurry of correspondence, his name disappears from the archival record.

Finally, it should be noted that when Fourès received the letter, it was already nearly eighteen months old, according to its lunar date (the equivalent of 11 January 1881). Probably because there was no Chinese interpreter in the protectorate office in Phnom Penh, and perhaps too because the lunar dating was incomplete and may not have been included in his summary translation, Fourès seems unaware of this fact. Had he know, he might have reacted differently to the contents of the document. Where Chánh is concerned, we can only speculate about his motives and why it took so long for the letter to reach French hands. Perhaps Chánh had only recently taken possession of it himself; or perhaps as a former member of the Phnom Penh Nghĩa Hưng he had fallen out with its leaders in the intervening period. Certainly personal animosity towards its author appears to have been a motivating factor in his delivering the letter to the French, since, as noted above, Fourès reported that Chánh preferred to give it to him rather than accept a handsome sum to return the letter to its author, in case it might “compromise Lothia Sa” (Tuk Hia Khai Boun) and other local Chinese leaders.

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### Translation

It is my humble opinion that brothers come together out of righteousness. It is because of this that we share common desires and care for each other. We admire the righteous style of Bao and Guan, and that of [Liu, Guan and Zhang] in the Peach Garden.

Yet we brothers recently have stuck to merely two characters, [Nghĩa] Hưng and [Nghĩa] Hòa, competing against each other, bullying the weak and the young. In the current situation, however, Nghĩa Hưng is numerous and strong, while Nghĩa Hòa is less numerous and weak. The weak cannot fight the strong, and the minority cannot fight the majority, this is certain. But why don’t we think about this: if all within the Four Seas are brothers, what do the two characters “Hưng” and “Hòa” matter?

What prompts me to write this letter is that I have learned from brothers Maoshe and Minghua that there are a few dozen Nghĩa Hòa people in your place who all want to register

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9. Letter of 9 July 1883, in Ibid.
10. Letter of 31 July 1883, in Ibid.
11. Yi, Vietnamese Nghĩa.
or change their affiliations to the Great Nghĩa Hưng Kongsi in Jinta (Phnom Penh, literally, “Golden Tower”). I have long wanted to say yes [to this], therefore I have drafted this letter quickly and sent it to you. Could I bother you with a message to send [to your followers] as follows:

To all brothers, whether they have previously joined any society or whether they are Nghĩa Hòa, and however many of them there are: if they are willing to submit to the Nghĩa Hưng Kongsi, please put the principle of harmony first and let us know as soon as possible, after which I will make the right decision. Those who have already joined [that is, the Nghĩa Hòa] do not need to go through the ritual of fire; they need do nothing but change their insignia to that of the Nghĩa Hung.

I look forward to talking more with you and wish you good health.

To brothers Zheng Junwu, Zhang Hexie and Yang Jinhe,

From Kaiwen

22nd day of 11th lunar month, the year of Xin [si]12

Please take this letter to Da Gang (Great Port) and hand it to Zheng Junwu, Zhang Hexie, and Yang Jinhe

Letter sent by Kaiwen

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12 This lunar date corresponds to 11 January 1882. The letter itself only contained the sky stem of the traditional dating cycle, the year of “Tân” (Xin in Chinese), without the normal earth branch that, taken together, would identify any particular year in the 60 year cycle. However, “Tân” recurs every 10 years (e.g., 1871–72, 1881–82, 1891–92), meaning that an early 1880s letter must have been sent in 1881–82, whose 11th month fell in January 1882.