

## **“Go West” in Cochinchina. Chinese and Vietnamese Illicit Activities in the Transbassac (c. 1860-1920s)**

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### **Abstract**

*Illicit activity was endemic in several coastal areas of pre-modern Vietnam. This article focuses on one such region, the west or Transbassac area of modern South Vietnam and its extended coastline from the Mekong Delta to Cambodian Kampot and Kompong Som and Siamese Trat. Chinese who settled here operated in both legal and illicit economies, as farmers and traders as well as smugglers, bandits, and pirates. This article discusses the geo-political factors that encouraged illicit activities, and outlines the historical circumstances that shaped local peoples into various economic, social, religious or political movements or organizations, including into Chinese and Vietnamese secret societies. Despite increasing colonial administrative penetration, many of these factors endured and ensured similar activities returned whenever circumstances changed, like during the First Indochina War.*

### **Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

Piracy, banditry and illicit trade have always existed throughout the long history of Vietnamese and Chinese economic and political interactions. Vietnam's mountainous border with China, and especially its lengthy coastline of more than 2,000 kilometres, attracted all sorts of socially marginalized people from China, like smugglers, refugees from persecution, illegal migrants, pirates, and bandits. The same pattern existed along the long Chinese coasts, where trade, smuggling, fishery and piracy have always been connected with each other. This was especially true for those periods of history when either China or Vietnam isolated itself, imposed a partial or total ban on foreign trade or on trading in particular products or levied prohibitive taxes to promote its own or to evict foreign products from their markets. In these times, smuggling immediately filled the gap, often protected *sui mano* by local officials who obstructed prosecution in exchange for participation in illicit gain.<sup>2</sup>

This pattern of illicit trade in ancient Northeast and Southeast Asia persisted well into the colonial period, with some modifications due to the modernisation of the means of trade and its control. This pointed, on the one hand, to the close connection and inter-dependence of the economic macro-regions of Northeast and Southeast Asia. On the other hand, it demonstrated the ineptness of state structures in dealing with this basic constituent of the region's economy. Free trade—as demanded by Samuel Baron in the seventeenth century, Sir John Bowring in the mid-nineteenth century, and by several generations of French administrators working in Indochina—was not yet the prevalent mode of thinking. Even if the French colonial power opened Indochina to the regional and world markets more than any other administration before it, the colonial ideology, that held a colony's task was to supply the Metropolitan market with raw materials and guarantee the sales of manufactured goods, imposed restrictions on free trade. French governors and administrators working on the ground knew only too well

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<sup>1</sup> This is a revised version of a paper presented at the Second Water Frontier workshop, Phuket, Thailand, 18-19 February, 2006. The author profited a great deal from the critical remarks of Nola Cooke and two anonymous reviewers. The opinions and ideas expressed in the paper, however, are those of the author.

<sup>2</sup> An illuminating example is the whole complex of Japanese and Chinese illicit trade and piracy during the Ming dynasty. See Kwan-wai So. *Japanese Piracy in Ming China during the 16th century*. Ann Arbor: Michigan State University Press 1975. Especially for Hainan see: Feray M., "Les Japonais à Hai-nan sous la dynastie des Ming (1368-1628)", *T'oung Pao*, Série II, Vol. VII, 1906, pp. 369-379.

where the traditional and prospective future markets of the colony were, and repeatedly demanded, without much success, that Paris take these basic necessities sufficiently into account.<sup>3</sup>

Restrictions, prohibitive taxes, and state monopolies, for example on opium, alcohol, salt and matches, created golden opportunities for illicit trade, right from the beginning of colonial rule until its end. Where illicit trade existed, piracy and banditry have always been around the corner. A second origin of piracy, and especially of its inland variant of banditry, was the economic development of former virgin or underdeveloped territories, which attracted honest settlers, farmers and traders, but also other kinds of marginal people, like tax evaders, smugglers, adventurers, outlaws, indigents and other people who were not keen to suffer too much hardship to make a living.

Is it possible to classify these marginalized people without distinction as “primitive social rebels”<sup>4</sup>? This question goes back to the discussion that originated in the 1950s, and was fuelled by the works of Hobsbawn and Chesneaux. They asked whether Chinese secret societies were economically pre-modern groups of petty-bourgeois origin, politically opposition forces which shaped the course of late imperial Chinese history but always inhibited a tendency towards political reformism rather than revolutionary change. The discussion of Western scholarship which developed in the decades thereafter showed, however, that this Marxist pattern of explanation was too simple and romantic. It did not take into account the complexity of the phenomenon nor its different manifestations, for the sworn brotherhoods at the base of these secret societies were a part of everyday Chinese life and local society just as much as specialised roving gangs of robbers and gangsters. These societies could be, in given circumstances, conservative or revolutionary, economically or politically orientated. With the archival evidence that has come to light from the late 1980s and 1990s, it has become clear that the Chinese secret societies were not centralised organizations, but locally independent and autonomous groups that shared similar rituals and imbued strong religious overtones in their recruitment and initiation processes. As time passed, nebulous political goals which may have existed in the founding period gave way to the seeking of economic gain through illicit or criminal methods.<sup>5</sup>

What would be the answer to this question in the light of our sources from French Indochina? The answer is yes, but only in the sense that these people at the margins of society rebelled against law and order as such. Undoubtedly we will also find among these people some archaic social rebels in the Hobsbawnian sense, namely people of primarily rural origin who were publicly crying out for vengeance against exploitation, but we will equally find members of mafia-like organizations that acted as instruments of power of individual men, and finally adherents of millenarian organizations that were most successfully built up if the leadership and ideology came from outside their original rural sphere.<sup>6</sup>

However, two arguments caution us against any determinist “ approach which would draw a red line from the banditry of the late nineteenth to the communist revolution of the twentieth century. First of all, the phenomena of smuggling, piracy, and banditry must be seen in a wider historical and geographical context. One particular time, the

<sup>3</sup> This topic has been treated profoundly and extensively by Giacometti, Jean-Dominique in “La question de l'autonomie de l'Indochine et les milieux coloniaux français 1915-1928”. Aix/Marseille: Université de Provence. Thèse de doctorat de Troisième cycle 1996. For the currency question, see Giacometti, Jean-Dominique. *La Bataille de la Piastre. Réalités économiques et perceptions politiques dans l'Empire colonial Français*. Berlin: Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, SÜDOSTASIEN Working Paper Nr. 9, 1998.

<sup>4</sup> See the definition see Hobsbawn, E.J. *Primitive Rebels. Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the nineteenth and twentieth Centuries*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1971 (reprinted with a new preface and minor amendments), p. 5-6.

<sup>5</sup> The discussion from the 1950s until the 1990s has been extensively traced by Dian Murray in *The Origins of the Tiandihu*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press: 1994, pp. 103-15.

<sup>6</sup> See *Ibid*.

late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and one particular place, the southern part of Vietnam or French Cochinchina, are the subjects of this article, but the phenomenon was not restricted to this historical period or to the south. It originated long before the French arrived and was a characteristic and constituent trait of the socio-economic development of the Mekong Delta, as the following two examples show.

The first large contingents of Chinese settlers in the Mekong Delta during the late seventeenth century were traders and pirates, patriotic to the Ming cause, who were fleeing the southern coasts when the Qing reunited China in the 1680s. They did not give up their lucrative occupation in this new land, which had assigned to them by the Nguyễn rulers in Huế, although formally it still belonged to the neighbouring Kingdom of Cambodia at that time. In the end, two English ships were chartered by the Siamese king to help suppress them. During this raid, William Dampier reported that English ships deeply penetrated the "Big River of Cambodia" where they found a fortified town on an island, probably the precursor of the later Mỹ Tho Đại Phố, which would become one of the gravitation centres of the future Chinese and Vietnamese colonization of the Mekong Delta.<sup>7</sup> The second example dates from 1791, when Nguyễn Phước Ánh, the future Emperor Gia Long, ordered that in Long Xuyên (modern Cà Mau) and other places, the Chinese, "*old and new*" (comers), be strongly advised to clear new land, and they would be exempted from levies, military service and other duties. If the "Tang people, *old and new*" were not willing to organise themselves in military plantations for this purpose, they were threatened with the full array of taxes and corvées, including the draft, "*in order to frighten pleasure seekers and layabouts*".<sup>8</sup> Similar examples from different periods could be found in the sources on pre-colonial Vietnam<sup>9</sup>

Secondly, anti-colonialism played a significant role in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Foreign rule was never popular among the lower and educated classes, among the so-called Native Asians of Indochina (Việt, Lao and Khmer) or among the so-called Foreign Asians (basically the Chinese). The many studies on Indochinese, and especially on Vietnamese, anti-colonialism that have seen the light since the late 1920s have repeatedly demonstrated this in a convincing way.<sup>10</sup> However, just as Chinese secret societies used the slogan "Overthrow the Qing, Restore the Ming!", so robbers and other people whom all human societies would classify as criminals of some sort could use anti-colonialist feelings as a cover or a pretext for their illicit activities, as the later discussion of the deeds of Cochinchina's secret societies will show. Were these gangsters recognized as anti-colonial rebels and thus popular among the common people? French sources, which speak about "bandits" without distinction, give only indirect hints, so we have to judge these phenomena historically on a case-by-case basis, by cautiously assessing their social character and their possible political implications. The atmosphere of a frontier society attracted peasants and traders, bandits and mercenaries, rebels and messianic leaders. Concrete historical circumstances moulded them, and their aims and aspirations, into particular manifestations of economic, social, religious or political movements or organizations. In

<sup>7</sup> "Voyage au Tonkin en 1688 (suite et fin)", *Revue Indochinoise* 13 (1910) 14, pp. 323-334

<sup>8</sup> See *Đại Nam Thực Lục, Chính Biên* [Dynastic veritable records, Gia Long reign], Tập II, Hanoi: NXB Sử học 1963, p. 133. Author's italics.

<sup>9</sup> The author treated this topic extensively in the first chapter of his book: *Die chinesische Minderheit im Süden Vietnams (Hoa) als Paradigma der kolonialen und nationalistischen Nationalitätenpolitik*. [The Chinese Minority in Southern Vietnam (Hoa) as a paradigm of colonial and nationalist ethnic politics]. Frankfurt am Main/Bern: Peter Lang, 2002, pp. 31-136.

<sup>10</sup> For an early account of Vietnamese nationalism in the making in late 1920s Cochinchina, and of looking to China as a role model by educated and humble classes of Vietnamese, see Werth, Léon. *La Cochinchine (voyage)*. Présentation de Jean Lacouture. Paris: Viviane Hamy, 1997. In-depth studies of this topic are too numerous to list, but include three major books by David Marr and also works by Georges Boudarel, Pierre Brocheux, Philippe Devillers, William Duiker, Charles Fourniau, Daniel Hémerly, Huệ Tâm Hồ Tài, Huỳnh Kim Khánh, and Paul Mus.

other words: piracy, banditry, secret societies, millenarianism, and revolutionary movements were plants which all grew out of the fertile soil which was French Cochinchina. They were not different in space, but in time and character.

However, as mentioned earlier, smuggling, piracy, and banditry existed in a regional context that was much wider historically and geographically than simply Cochinchina, or even modern Vietnam. Seaborne activities mainly originated from three areas, each with its own characteristic features. First, and historically most ancient, was northern Vietnam, called Tongking during the colonial period. There geography and climate assisted piracy and smuggling in the many islands scattered in the foggy Gulf of Tongking that created ideal conditions for hidden refuges or escape from pursuit. In the late eighteenth century, Chinese pirates here even played a significant political and military role by joining the navy of the usurping Tây Sơn rebels, just as a different group of pirates would do further south in support of the eventual Nguyễn victors of a three decade civil war.<sup>11</sup> Second was a zone of activity radiating out of Hainan Island. Its junk fleets regularly traded with Macao, the Chinese and Vietnamese coasts, and ports in island Southeast Asia. The island's Han Chinese coastal population was mainly immigrants or refugees from Guangdong, with the Hakka particularly important. Fishermen here, as elsewhere, might engage in opportunistic piracy, if a suitable chance appeared. But what distinguished Hainan's general trade, at least by the later nineteenth century, was its domination by illegal organizations. Its secret societies' networks stretched to Hong Kong, Shanghai, and Singapore,<sup>12</sup> while Hainanese shipping was especially important in the "coolie" trade to Bangkok or Singapore. Teochiu dominated the rice trade between Saigon and Swatow, where Chinese junks retained a virtual monopoly in the colonial era.<sup>13</sup> Beyond this, small and manoeuvrable Hainanese junks also engaged in all kinds of illicit activities, including the abduction of Vietnamese women and children for sale in Mainland China.<sup>14</sup>

The third area of illicit activities, which is the focus of this article, stretched from the uninhabited or sparsely inhabited coastal areas of southeast Cambodia (especially between Kampot and Ream), including islands in the Gulf of Siam off the south-western coast of Vietnam, through to the Ca Mau peninsula. This stretch of a much longer "frontier" coastal region that extended right around the Gulf of Siam<sup>15</sup> might be called the wider Transbassac, as it incorporated the Cochinchinese region called the Transbassac by the French, or the "Western part" (*miền Tây*) of southern Vietnam in contemporary Vietnamese sources,<sup>16</sup> with its economic extension along the coast to Cambodian Kampot and Kompong Som.

Until the early twentieth century, the Transbassac proper was one of three remaining regions that might be categorised as frontiers within the colony of French Cochinchina, as southern Vietnam was officially called between 1859 and 1945. Along with the Transbassac, these frontier areas included the Cambodian-Cochinchinese border and the hilly jungle area to the north and north-east of Saigon, in Biên Hòa and Thu Dầu Một provinces. In these geographical zones, human penetration, political control and

<sup>11</sup> For the problem of Chinese piracy in China and Vietnam during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, see Murray. *Pirates of the South China Coast*, *passim*.

<sup>12</sup> Seagrave, Sterling. *The Soong Dynasty*. New York: Harper and Row, 1985, pp. 18-20.

<sup>13</sup> Labrusse, Serge. *Politique du cabotage en Indochine*. Saigon: Imprimerie Française d'Outre-Mer 1950, p. 63.

<sup>14</sup> M. Périgand, Réceveur des Douanes et Régies at Cát-Bà to the Résident at Quảng Yên, 16 juin 1912. In: National Archives of Vietnam No. I (hereafter: QG I), RST (Résidence Supérieure du Tonkin) 01376.

<sup>15</sup> Li Tana has called this region the Chinese "water frontier" of Southeast Asia. See "The Water Frontier. An Introduction", in *Water Frontier: Commerce and the Chinese in the Lower Mekong Region, 1750-1880*, ed. Nola Cooke and Li Tana. Boulder, Col: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004, pp. 1-17.

<sup>16</sup> For the different names and their connotations in history see Brocheux, Pierre. *The Mekong Delta. Economy, Ecology and Revolution*. Madison: University of Wisconsin-Madison, Center for Southeast Asian Studies, 1995, pp. 1-17.

economic development were all low, or even just beginning to occur, and Vietnamese formed only of several resident ethnic groups, among Chinese and Khmer people and the offspring of mixed marriages with Chinese (the male offspring of which were called Minh Hương, if the father had been Chinese). For both political and economic reasons, the colonial authorities tried to speed their advance into these places but, in the end, the process took its own time and was not yet finished when the French were forced to withdraw from Indochina after 1954. These areas had long been—or better said, always remained—breeding grounds for all kinds of illicit activities and provided ideal retreats for tax evaders, absconding debtors, landless peasants, messianic leaders, criminals, government opponents, or outright political rebels.

The principal sources for this article are drawn from the colonial archives of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>17</sup> Among the printed sources, the provincial monographs produced on behalf of the *Société des Études Indochinoises* (SEI) in Saigon at the beginning of the twentieth century, were also particularly valuable. Understandably, an article written on colonial Indochina based on French (archival and other) sources alone might run the risk of importing a biased perspective from those sources, and thus of lacking impartiality. In the end, all historians tend, to a certain degree, to be captivated by and captives of their sources, which are one of their main tools of trade. As robbers and bandits did not have written records of their own, at least as far as we know it today, we are forced to use the records of their “enemies”, which does indeed can create a problem of perspective and impartiality. However, if we always look at these sources with a critical eye, which is the other main tool of the historian’s trade, then it lessens the problem of perceived bias.

Furthermore, sources are never more intelligent than the people who wrote them. Just as we must avoid imagining that everything French administrators collected and noted must be “true”, so too must we avoid the opposite risk of imagining it must be “wrong”, simply because it was written by “colonialists”. As much as in any other administration in the world, there are no difficulties in identifying careerists and timeserving bureaucrats in French Indochina. However, we also find many personalities with high intellectual capacities and moral standards, with a reasonable academic education, sometimes even specialist orientalist training, before they went to Indochina. They worked there for long years and in different areas, were fluent in at least one, or sometimes more, of its ancient or modern languages, had a profound understanding of the region and expressed human sympathies with the people they administered, despite serving a cause which is today unanimously condemned. In the four decades before the *École Française d’Extrême-Orient* was founded as the first centre of academic research in Indochina, these administrators, together with Catholic missionaries, were the precursors and path-breakers of the later Vietnamese, Khmer and Lao studies. In the decades afterwards, many works they produced still testify to their high intellectual capacities. This does not of course mean that everything they wrote was “right”, but at least it should be taken seriously. Looked at from a practical perspective, another interesting aspect of their work is to find out how they reacted to the traditional challenges they encountered during their administrative duties, like smuggling, piracy, and banditry.

This article begins by establishing the geo-political and economic foundations of the wider Transbassac region. We then review what archival sources reveal of illicit activities there. Switching to a slightly different perspective, we then consider the Chinese Heaven and Earth Society (*Thiên Địa Hội*) in early colonial Cochinchina, especially in regard to its role in spreading the idea and organizational model of secret societies from Chinese to Vietnamese. The article then concludes with an epilogue that

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<sup>17</sup> The principal archival sources are from the *Archives d’Outre Mer* in Aix-en-Provence (hereafter AOM), the National Archives No. 1 and 2 of Vietnam (QGI or QGII) and the National Archives of Cambodia (ANC)

reflects on continuity and change in illicit activities in this region during the rest of the colonial era.

### The Geo-Political Conditions of the Transbassac

Moving from the northeast to the southwest, three geo-political sub-regions are usually distinguished in French Cochinchina: the region east and north of Saigon; the Cissbassac; and the Transbassac.<sup>18</sup> All of these three sub-regions shared a similar settlement pattern: there were more populated and more tightly controlled centres surrounded by less developed or sparsely populated areas at the fringes where, since long before the French, rebels, criminals, and refugees had found sanctuaries or hideouts for illicit activities.

Two of these broad areas are defined by reference to the Bassac River, the Cissbassac, and the territory further west, across the river. We might start by asking what was the difference between these two regions? Geographically, there was very little: both were plains, framed and dominated by the flow of water—mainly by two important rivers, the Bassac (in Vietnamese, Hậu Giang) and the Mekong (Tiền Giang)<sup>19</sup> and their branches and tributaries. Small rivers flooded into larger ones, forming river crossings, while creeks, acting as natural canals (*rạch*), and man-made canals (*kênh* or *kinh* or in French *arroyo*, originally a Spanish term), increasingly extended in all directions. All these small and large waterways created innumerable networks of crisscrossing lines of communication. The alluvial deposits of the rivers formed the soil, with nothing beyond a few alluvial dunes (*giồng*) to interrupt the flat picture of water and rice fields.<sup>20</sup> At the inter-space between sea and land, where salty and fresh water environments met, mangrove forests (*tràm*) grew out of the mouths of rivers.<sup>21</sup> In most diverse populations they were situated in the tidal swamps along the coast of the Mekong delta and Cà Mau peninsula, where they were regularly inundated by salty or brackish water. With the oceanic and coastal currents coming from the south and southwest, southern Vietnamese mangrove swamps regularly received mangrove propagules from as far away as the Malaysian and Indonesian coasts.<sup>22</sup>

The Bassac River had always been an important communications link between Cochinchina and Cambodia, as well as Phnom Penh's most important access to the sea in pre-colonial and colonial times. By the later nineteenth century, sandbanks were impeding the two main mouths of the Mekong, at Cửa Đại and Cửa Ba Lai, causing some difficulties for the navigation of ships and larger junks.<sup>23</sup> The Bassac on the other hand connected rather than separated: the smaller and larger islands that lay within the river—some populated, some not—did not impede navigation and facilitated the crossing of this broad river.

To use the left and right banks of the Bassac River as a border is to create a line that designates the eastern and the western parts of the Mekong Delta. The major difference between the two regions was in terms of human penetration, ethnic mixture,

<sup>18</sup> The French patterned this usage after the Roman Empire, in which Gallic tribes were divided into geographical areas called "Before the Alps" (Cisalpine) and "Beyond the Alps" (Transalpine). I am grateful to Nola Cooke for this explanation. Although of colonial origin, this terminology was not rigidly observed in all colonial literature.

<sup>19</sup> Bassac is the Khmer name. The French also called it the *Fleuve postérieur*. The name for the other branch of the Mekong River is *Grand Fleuve* (from the Khmer *Tonlé Thom*) or *Fleuve antérieur* (from the Vietnamese *Tiền Giang*).

<sup>20</sup> Bouault, J. *Géographie de l'Indochine, P. III: La Cochinchine*. Hanoi/Haiphong: Imprimerie d'Extrême-Orient, 1927, pp. 2-5.

<sup>21</sup> The collective noun mangrove does not designate a taxonomic group of plants but one united by shared ecology and adaptation to growth in saline environments. For more detail see Sterling, Eleanor Jane/Hurley, Martha Maud/ Lê Duc Minh. *Vietnam. A Natural History*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006: 91-95.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* For a nineteenth-century description of this area, see Brière, "Rapport sur la circonscription de Cà-mau", *Excursions et Reconnaissances*, Vol 1, 1879, pp. 5-25.

<sup>23</sup> *Monographie de la province de My Tho*. Saigon: Imprimerie L. Menard, 1924, p. 7.

and economy. Large parts of the Cisbassac had already been opened to cultivation by Chinese and Vietnamese in the eighteenth century, and then primarily by Vietnamese in the nineteenth century, long before the French arrived in 1858. By then Vietnamese were the predominant ethnic group. In the Transbassac, however, agricultural development largely occurred under colonialism, beginning in the 1880s after the last anti-colonial rebels had been suppressed. Until the early twentieth century, however, the population here was very much more mixed than in the east, with Vietnamese, Chinese, Khmer, and Minh Hương still living in close proximity, as they had done in the past.<sup>24</sup> Due to this historical process, another important difference arose between the two areas in the twentieth century: long settled agricultural land in the Cisbassac was usually divided into small plots and worked by peasants landowners, while the colonial digging of canals, in the Transbassac especially, enabled the opening of large stretches of land that could be auctioned to the highest bidder, creating the conditions for the development of large landholdings and plantations worked by tenant farmers.

For the purposes of my argument, however, I want to look at a larger Transbassac, not simply the territory now belonging to southern Vietnam but also the coastal strip that extended into southeast Cambodia, with which the small ports of the Ca Mau peninsula had so many economic ties. This section is therefore divided into two: the first considers the Transbassac proper and the second looks at the Transbassac as a coastal region extending from the ports of Rạch Giá and Hà Tiên, in modern Vietnam, to Kampot, Ream, and Kompong Som in modern Cambodia.

#### *a. the Vietnamese Transbassac*

“Transbassac” was the colonial name of the area beyond the right bank of the Hậu Giang River, long known to Europeans by its Khmer name of Bassac. This sub-region covered an area of around 15,000 square kilometres between Châu Đốc, at the Cambodian border in the north, the Gulf of Siam in the west, and the South China Sea in the east. In the period under review, the area was covered with marshes, interspersed with large alluvial dunes, some of which were used for agriculture but were often also covered with grassland and light jungle. These dunes housed the original Khmer population, whereas the Vietnamese usually pioneered the new land along the waterways. Chinese settlers also established markets at river mouths and crossings that often served as centres of attraction around which Vietnamese lived in more compact settlements. Compared to the Cisbassac, this whole area was still very thinly populated in the late nineteenth century, with the exception of some Khmer enclaves. The Vietnamese village communities that did exist here were also usually younger and less stable,<sup>25</sup> the administrative structure was weaker, and French control lower. All these factors helped make the Transbassac a real breeding ground for all kinds of unlawful activities.

The province of Sóc Trăng is a good example. In 1904, it covered 2,300 square kilometres, but had only 105,000 inhabitants, among them 57,000 Vietnamese and Minh Hương (who unfortunately were not counted separately), 38,000 Cambodians and Sino-Cambodians, as well as 10,000 Chinese. Of the Chinese, 7,000 were Teochiu, and the others were mainly Cantonese or Hokkien. We know there were few Hainanese or Hakka speakers in Sóc Trăng at the time, because the French required all Chinese in the colony to be enrolled in dialect-based organizations called *congrégations*<sup>26</sup> and no

<sup>24</sup> Nola Cooke cites several examples from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century in “Water World. Chinese and Vietnamese on the Riverine Water Frontier, from Ca Mau to Tonle Sap (c. 1850-1884)”, in *Water Frontier*, 2004, pp. 139-43.

<sup>25</sup> For some examples of this instability, see *Ibid.*, p. 144.

<sup>26</sup> *Congrégations* (Sino-Vietnamese: *Bang*) were, from the time of the Vietnamese Nguyễn dynasty, the legal entities for all Chinese, who did not relate individually to the authorities but only as members of these groups under the personal responsibility of the “*chefs de congrégation*” or *bang trưởng*. After a short but unsuccessful

such groups existed for Hakka or Hainanese speakers in early-twentieth-century Sóc Trăng. The population density was still low, at only 2.2 per square kilometre.<sup>27</sup> Two different regions could be distinguished in Sóc Trăng. First was the heartland that, like a central corridor running from the northern edge of the Bassac to the boundary of neighbouring Bạc Liêu province in the southwest, was one “big rice field”. There, four cantons (Định Hòa, Nhiều Khánh, Nhiều Hòa, and Nhiều Phú) surrounded the provincial centre. In 1904, barely 50 Europeans, 771 Vietnamese, 600 Chinese and 30 Indians lived in Sóc Trăng town, which had been planned along European lines, a sort of provincial “Saigon”. The local equivalent of “Cholon” was the Chinese port of Bãi Xàu, constructed after the old Chinese harbour (Chợ cũ or Mỹ Xuyên) had been abandoned due to the silting of the near-by canal. Bãi Xàu was about ten kilometres southeast of Sóc Trăng, along the Ba Xuyên canal. In 1904, 930 Vietnamese and Minh Hương, 650 Chinese and a few Indians lived there. This anchorage was a lively market town and was frequented from late February until June, especially in the three months after the spring harvest, by the large junks (*ghe chài*) of Cholon traders. They came in search of Sóc Trăng's rice, considered the best in Cochinchina. In the period that interests us, more than 200 junks usually plied this trade and exported on average 180,000 piculs (*gja*) of rice per month.<sup>28</sup>

The province lived on its rice and only on its rice. Every month, about 250 junks delivered fruits, vegetables, and consumer goods to the markets of Sóc Trăng and Bãi Xàu. From the late nineteenth century, the population of Bãi Xàu increased year by year. Industrial and commercial activities, like alcohol distillation or hand-driven sawmills, began springing up, the latter using wood imported from Cambodia, Cà Mau and Rạch Giá. Chinese, and their offspring from Vietnamese or Khmer women, lived here in considerable numbers, not only in the two above-mentioned places but in all the markets of this province.<sup>29</sup>

If roughly more than half of the province's surface area (1,410 square kilometres) was under agricultural production by then, 764 square kilometres, especially including large areas in the north-western and western part, in the districts (*quận*) of Dinh Khanh (or Kế Sách) and Nhiều Mỹ, still awaited cultivation. This wild jungle was the home of tigers, elephants, and crocodiles. The delta of the Bassac River, in the northeast and southeast of Sóc Trăng, afforded handy sea and river communications with several

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experiment with direct and individual administration of Chinese, the French reintroduced this traditional system in 1863 in Cochinchina. In Saigon and Cholon there were five according to regional origin: Foukien (Fujian), Canton (Guangdong), Téochiu (Chaozhou), Hainan and Hakka. In the provinces of Cochinchina, and later in the other parts of French Indochina, the number of congregations depended on there being sufficient members locally, as these bodies had to sustain themselves and raise taxes for the administration. If congregations accepted newcomers upon arrival, they became responsible, in the persons of the leaders, for the new members' actions throughout their stay and had to pay outstanding taxes or fines for all kind of irregularities. Newcomers not accepted by a congregation had to leave the colony immediately, at the expense of the congregation that had rejected them. Thus, the French administration left an important part of the policing of this minority to their own leaders. The cooperation of the congregations was vital and effective in containing secret societies' activities in the nineteenth century and unwanted political activities in the twentieth century. After the French extended it to all parts of Indochina, they modernized it (with the help of the *Service de l'Immigration* and its central finger print register), and defended it stubbornly against all criticism from subsequent Chinese governments until the very last day of their rule (1954). See Engelbert, 2002, pp. 118-130, 185-192, 300-324, 505-514.

<sup>27</sup> See *Monographie de la province de Soc-Trang*. Saigon: Imprimerie Commerciale Ménard et Rey 1904, p. 73. These figures should be compared with Cambodia, where criminal gangs, banditry, and piracy remained rampant throughout the colonial period. Even more interesting than general figures is the uneven division of the population within the different provinces, which generally covered large areas, and had a low level of settlement in places distant from the provincial centres and the larger waterways. See *Annuaire Général de l'Indochine*, Hanoi/Haiphong 1925, p.13; *Annuaire statistique de l'Indochine 1947-1948*, Saigon 1949, p.19.

<sup>28</sup> Or about 10,800 tonnes. See *Monographie de la province de Soc-Trang*. Saigon: Imprimerie Commerciale Ménard et Rey 1904, p. 45.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

neighbouring provinces (Bạc Liêu, Cần Thơ, Vĩnh Long, Trà Vinh, and Bến Tre); but at the time its coastal shore was nearly uninhabited, as were several small islands and sandbanks situated along it. Altogether, in 1904 the French only rated twelve kilometres of provincial roads as suitable for vehicles. As in the past, the best communications were still by water, and many small indigenous boats and larger European launches travelled the many shallow waterways, streams, and canals that led to the larger river ports and markets, as well as to the provincial capital.<sup>30</sup>

The administration naturally wanted to develop these areas, but labour was short, especially for large French concessions. The introduction of labourers from more populous central Vietnam (colonial Annam) had only shown mixed results. Such Vietnamese coolies often took their advance and then fled their “contractors”. While the working conditions of Vietnamese tenant farmers on the rice growing estates in the Mekong Delta were not as inhumane as those documented for rubber plantations in Biên Hòa,<sup>31</sup> they were still threatened by natural misfortunes (like the penetration of salty or brackish water into cleared areas) or by their progressive indebtedness to their landlords and to Chinese traders/creditors. The immense fortunes of the large estate holders allowed them, by the 1930s, to lived elsewhere, mostly Cần Thơ or Saigon but even as far away as Paris; but these fortunes were bought at the cost of instability, precariousness, negligence, and, increasingly, of the poverty and misery of almost all tenant farmers, as the provincial governor of Bạc Liêu warned in 1937.<sup>32</sup>

One peculiarity of the settlement pattern in the former six provinces of southern Vietnam, now French Cochinchina, was a large population of non-settled people, who lived on boats or in floating settlements on the shores of rivers and canals. Usually they earned their living as day labourers, or they might gather wood, go fishing or engage in all kinds of illicit activities. People might join this “unsteady” or, in Vietnamese, “floating” population (*lưu dân*) because of poverty, indebtedness, crop failure or other mishaps. More often than not, their ranks also included vagabonds, layabouts, and adventurers who disliked the difficulties and hardships associated with agriculture and the clearing of new land.<sup>33</sup> Such floating villages were especially common among the Vietnamese of the lower Mekong region. In the province of Châu Đốc, for instance, these agglomerations could be found along most rivers and canals. A boat, a miserable straw hut on land (*paillote*), and some square metres of a garden was all these people owned. Many mobile Vietnamese from such settlements also took advantage of the nearby Cambodian border to avoid taxation (and greater official control), much to the annoyance of the French governor in 1904.<sup>34</sup> How could the colonial administration make these apathetic people clear the immense fertile plain behind their miserable huts, he fumed in vain.<sup>35</sup> Land ownership rights, low taxation, and credits in the initial period might have helped to answer his question, but the French authorities preferred what was, in effect, a system of disincentives, favouring concessions worked by tenant

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7

<sup>31</sup> For the rubber plantations, see, for instance, Tran Tu Binh. *The Red Earth. A Vietnamese Memoir of Life on a Colonial Rubber Plantation*. Translated by John Spragens jr., ed. David G. Marr. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Monographs on International Studies, 1985. For the official position, see Delamarre, E. *L'émigration et l'immigration ouvrière en Indochine*. Hanoi: Imprimerie d'Extrême-Orient, 1931. See also Delamarre's critical report to the French government cited in Ngo Van, 1986, Annex 1.

<sup>32</sup> See Notice sur la province de Baclieu. Tournée de M. le Gouverneur Général, 25 août 1937. AOM, Indo., RST 01377. See also extensively for this topic Brocheux 1995, pp. 173-208.

<sup>33</sup> Milles-Lacroix, Administrateur d'Hatien, to Gouverneur de la Cochinchine. Hatien, 6 novembre 1935. In: QG II, Goucoch. 1,211.

<sup>34</sup> *Monographie de la province de Châu-Đôc*. Saigon: Imprimerie L. Ménard 1902, p. 47.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

farmers and a high tax regime that forced most tenants into life-long financial dependence.<sup>36</sup>

Importing Chinese coolies, who generally worked well, might have been a solution to the problem. But they were considered arrogant, independent-minded, and unlikely to disguise their hostility to the French.<sup>37</sup> As early as 1882, the tendency of Teochiu coolies to join secret societies was viewed with distrust by the Cochinchinese governor Le Myre de Vilers, who proposed to replace them with Vietnamese.<sup>38</sup> Despite all this, however, the decisive factor was economic: Chinese coolies were much more expensive.<sup>39</sup> In general, and in the long-term perspective, Chinese were not needed as the workforce for Cochinchinese agriculture. Until the early twentieth century Vietnamese still showed some reluctance to work as wage labourers and coolies, but they could still carry out all tasks related to irrigated rice agriculture and plantations at a much cheaper price than Chinese labourers.

What attracted most Chinese to the Transbassac was being allowed to work their own land or to work for themselves in some other way. Chinese people had been visiting or settling in the Transbassac since at least the late eighteenth century. Although the area featured on the itineraries of many Hainanese junk traders who came there to buy fish and prawns from local producers,<sup>40</sup> among the Chinese who settled the land Teochiu speakers formed the largest group, just as in central and eastern Siam and Cambodia. They contributed substantially to the clearing of new lands and to the promotion of market agriculture, especially through the rice trade, but were also engaged in pepper, fruit, and vegetable growing. From the late nineteenth century, Hainanese workers also laboured on French and Chinese pepper plantations in the Transbassac, as well as in southeast Cambodia, especially between Kampot and Kompong Som. For political and economic reasons, the colonial authorities regarded cultivation of large parts of Indochina by Chinese peasants as an abhorrent idea, even if it was at least tacitly tolerated in Cambodia and in the Khmer populated areas of Cochinchina, especially in the Transbassac.<sup>41</sup>

In general, French governors and administrators—as imperial Vietnamese and royal Cambodian governments had before them—saw Teochiu land clearance and marriage with “native” wives as a favourable precondition to a desired long-term assimilation. In colonial eyes, these *mestizos* were blessed with superior diligence, thrift and an entrepreneurial spirit when compared with the “pure native” populations. This view was expounded in the debate between promoters and adversaries of Chinese immigration at the beginning of the twentieth century: intermarriage between Chinese and “natives” would “improve the blood” of the latter and inspire them to develop their sense of economic initiative and social improvement, proponents asserted.<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, Chinese holdings in the countryside ought to be restricted to small and medium-sized possessions, it was argued, as large concessions and plantations were in principle

<sup>36</sup> Exceptions were made for Catholic concessions, populated with settlers from Tonkin. Peasants who cleared new land enjoyed six years of tax freedom, and afterwards paid full taxes for three years. Then the land became their property. *Création des villages de colonisation indigène*, QG II, Goucoch. 1,211.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> See Gouvernement de la Cochinchine. Cabinet du Gouverneur. Saigon, 19 juin 1882. Au sujet de la Sie. secrète du Ciel et de la Terre (signé: Le Myre de Vilers). AOM, Indo., Nouveaux Fonds [NF] 31,449. I am grateful to Nola Cooke for having brought this document to my attention.

<sup>39</sup> In 1909, a Chinese coolie in Indochina earned from 60 centimes to one piastre a day. See Lafargue, Jean-André. *L'immigration chinoise en Indochine. Sa réglementation, ses conséquences économiques et politiques*. Paris: Henri Jouve, éditeur, 1909, p. 275.

<sup>40</sup> Brière, "Ca Mau": 18, 24; and Benoist, "Note de M. Benoist, ancien inspecteur de Rach-gia, au sujet de l'exploitation d'une pêcherie de crevettes à Ca-mau", *Excursions et Reconnaissances*, Vol 1, (1879), p. 29.

<sup>41</sup> For an extensive discussion of this topic see Engelbert, 2002, pp. 204-08.

<sup>42</sup> Schreiner, A. "Étude sur la constitution de la propriété foncière en Cochinchine", *Bulletin de la Société des Études Indochinoises (BSEI)* Vol 1, (1902), pp. 9- 303, quote, p. 28.

allowed only to French citizens and capital societies.<sup>43</sup> These beliefs saw the French administration maintain the traditional citizenship law, which had originated during the Nguyễn dynasty, for as long as possible: until 1933 in Cochinchina and Annam, and 1934 in Cambodia.<sup>44</sup> Under these traditional provisions, the sons of a Chinese father with a native (Vietnamese or Khmer) mother were called Minh Hương and enjoyed, in regard to taxation and citizenship rights, a special legal status between Foreign Asians (*khách*) and natives (*dân đĩnh*). Offspring of marriages between Minh Hương fathers and native mothers, however, were treated as fully assimilated natives in regard to taxation, military service, *corvée* and the right to leave the country, something automatically granted only to foreigners. Under this regulation, full assimilation of male descendants of mixed origin was guaranteed by the third generation.

If Teochiu agriculturalists were welcome, Cantonese and Hokkien were regarded with a certain degree of suspicion because of their tendency to stick together in “China towns”, or “quarters”, and to engage primarily in trade, businesses, crafts, and banking rather than agriculture. Measures to “evict” them from these important economic niches, or to curb their immigration, were repeatedly demanded by French political interest groups and business circles in Saigon, Hanoi and Paris. But such actions were never seriously considered by the colonial authorities, who were well aware that such policies would have destroyed the Indochinese, and especially the Cochinchinese, economy.<sup>45</sup>

*b. the wider Transbassac coastline, from Rạch Giá to Kampot*

This coastline was historically a nest of pirates and smugglers. Like the much of the Gulf of Siam, its many rugged islands and scarcely inhabited shores, with their swamps and marshes, provided ideal refuges for Chinese, Malay, Siamese, Cambodian, or Vietnamese rebels and outlaws, and those who opportunistically moved between licit and illicit activities. This situation persisted from the seventeenth and eighteenth century Ming loyalist exodus from China through the nineteenth century, right up until the First and Second Indochina Wars. If French gunboats were increasingly able to control most of the main Indochinese coastline after 1865, the islands in the Gulf, and especially Phú Quốc opposite Hà Tiên, long formed the exception. They continued to provide safe havens for those in trouble with the authorities, like the Chinese who had fled colonial justice or extradition from Cochinchina and lived on their boats as an “independent republic”,<sup>46</sup> far from the watchful eyes of the authorities. These men generally married or formed liaisons with Vietnamese women, but otherwise kept to themselves. Even their offspring formed their own settlements and reportedly did not mix much with their neighbours, except at local festivities. These Chinese were feared as troublemakers, especially among the Hainanese pepper plantations of Kampot and Hà Tiên.<sup>47</sup> Nevertheless, they were very difficult for the French to control. The many junks passing by on their way to Bangkok and Singapore easily helped wanted individuals to reappear or disappear, as required.

The Cambodian coast and its hinterland served as a natural topographical extension of Siamese territory in its southwest portion and of Cochinchina in its southern portion.

<sup>43</sup> This was the guiding spirit. In practise, the legislation changed according to different circumstances, mainly dictated by supply and demand. For this topic see Brocheux, 1995, pp. 17-51.

<sup>44</sup> After this date, Minh Hương were considered as natives only in Annam. In Cambodia, they were considered foreigners but could ask for Cambodian citizenship, which was normally granted. In Cochinchina, they had the right to ask for foreign citizenship, if they were born between 1883 and 1933 and already had it. This arose from the compromise in the 1930 Convention of Nanjing between China and France: China had wanted all Minh Hương to be Chinese citizens, while France had wanted them as natives. Ultimately, this failure to agree created the basis for Ngô Đình Diệm’s forced naturalization act of 1956. See Engelbert, 2002, pp. 505-56

<sup>45</sup> For a more detailed discussion see *Ibid.*, pp. 204-08.

<sup>46</sup> *Monographie de l’Isle de Phu-Quốc, province d’Ha-Tiên*. Saigon: Imprimerie Saigonnaise, 1906, p.44.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

For the most part, the Cambodian coast here is covered by high mountains, with the Cardamon Mountains to the southwest and the Elephant chain to the south. Well into colonial times, these mountains were only thinly populated by an ethnic minority of Mon-Khmer origin, the Pear, who had intermingled with Khmer fugitives, rebels and exiles, to form the so-called *Pol* (slaves). They were officially required to give their cardamom, gambodge and ironwood to the French-Cambodian authorities in exchange for salt, rice, and ironware. But their intimate contacts with compatriots on the Siamese side of the border meant the Pear usually smuggled much of their valuable commodities to the Sino-Siamese networks based in Trat.<sup>48</sup> Just like the many small islands in the Gulf, the mountainous hinterland of these provinces sheltered all sorts of marginal people keen to tap into the economy of the coast. Trading and fishing junks from eastern Siam and southern Vietnam regularly visited Kampot and Kompong Som (off the Siamese island of Koh Kong). In the early twentieth century, Kompong Som still had more maritime relations with Siam than with French Indochinese ports like Kampot, Hà Tiên and Rạch Giá. The Siamese baht (*ticul*), and not the Indochinese piastre, was its currency. More than a third of the junks that frequented Kompong Som paid no duty and escaped customs' controls, according to the estimate of Kampot's provincial resident in 1900.<sup>49</sup> The Chinese and Vietnamese of Kampot and Kompong Som also maintained close trading relations with the nearby Cochinchinese harbours of Hà Tiên and Rạch Giá, with Phú Quốc Island, and, via land and water routes, with Châu Đốc on the Bassac River and hence with Saigon-Cholon. Malays were also important here. Several Malay villages dated back to at least the eighteenth century,<sup>50</sup> but, until French occupation, newcomers also came from the Malay Peninsula to sell weapons and spices like galanga. They easily integrated with their Cham co-religionists, with whom they formed communities.

Kampot has always been the "alter ego" of Hà Tiên, and it was Cambodia's most important outlet to the sea once the Vietnamese occupied the Bassac mouth. During the period of direct Vietnamese occupation (until 1847), Kampot had been a Vietnamese military post, administrative centre, and a custom's office. Even after the imperial armies retreated from Cambodia, a considerable number of Vietnamese remained there in peasant or fishing villages. Until 1860, the province was governed by a half-Chinese called Thong, who planted sugar cane and set up a quite successful mule-driven sugar refinery. Another famous Chinese of Kampot at that time was Mun Sui. Formerly feared as a pirate throughout the whole Gulf of Siam, Mun Sui had retired to Kampot after being defeated by another pirate. There he became a venerated mediator in Chinese affairs until his death in 1878. In pre- and early colonial times, Kampot's tax burden was low—one-tenth of the harvest—and the country produced pepper, sugar cane, tobacco, and paddy for export. Fruits abounded and were sent to Phnom Penh for the royal household. The area was prosperous enough to pay for three theatre groups to serve their different clientele: a Chinese and a Vietnamese theatre, plus a Siamese-Cambodian dance troupe.<sup>51</sup>

Kampot's neighbouring province to the southeast was Péam or Banteay Meas. In 1887, it only comprised ten villages, where 2,400 Khmer, 250 Chinese, twenty Vietnamese and seven Cham-Malay taxpayers lived. Its main product was Chinese pepper. Land communications with Kampot were so poor that the Chinese growers

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<sup>48</sup> 'Les "Pols" de la Région de Pursat', *Revue Indo-Chinoise*, 1903, pp.1,025-1,028.

<sup>49</sup> Résident de France à Kampot à Monsieur le Résident Supérieur à Phnom Penh (Rapport de M. Leclère sur la province de Kompong Som), 25 avril 1900. ANC, RSC 1700.

<sup>50</sup> See Yumio Sakurai, "Eighteenth-Century Chinese Pioneers on the Water Frontier of Indochina", in *Water Frontier*, 2004, pp. 43-45 for Malays along this coast.

<sup>51</sup> *Monographie de l'isle de Phu-Quốc*, p. 9.

traded their crops with three small peddling boats that went to Châu Đốc in Cochinchina.<sup>52</sup>

In 1865, after an expedition to Hà Tiên and Kampot, the Governor of Cochinchina, Admiral de la Grandière, ordered French gunboats to end Vietnamese and Chinese “piracy” (by which he also meant anti-French armed activities, if Vietnamese were involved) in the Gulf of Siam. As the French believed such activities largely originated in these two places,<sup>53</sup> they set up a military post and a custom’s office at Kampot. Traders who sold local pepper to Saigon-Cholon henceforth had to pay customs at the French custom’s office. Some years later, Kampot’s role in the nationwide anti-French rising of 1885-1886 briefly set back these attempts at greater control, and also destroyed large tracts of the pepper plantations. When peace returned, in the later 1880s, the royal tax farmer levied an exorbitant tax on local pepper producers, from 17.5 to 23 piastres per 400 pepper plants, rousing violent protests among the local Chinese planters.<sup>54</sup> From here on Kampot had difficulty regaining its former prosperity. Under the harsh tax and customs regime of the later 1880s, local people began to leave the area. The several villages that together formed Kampot proper had counted about 3,000 people in 1860 and had soared to 5–7,000 tax payers by the early 1870s (among them 900 Chinese, 300 Malays and Cham, forty Vietnamese, and thirty Siamese), but after the uprising, in 1889, the population was only 2,500, and then barely 1,500 in the early 1890s. For a short while, Chinese gambling became a new attraction but this only hastened the economic ruin of many of those who had remained. One other factor in particular ensured Kampot’s economic decline: Cambodia’s main exports—rice and fish (also exported, especially after 1907, from Battambang), cotton, maize, wood and other natural products—were again travelling via the Bassac or Mekong to Saigon-Cholon, which now became Cambodia’s main outlet to the sea. Kampot was reduced to a regional entrepot.<sup>55</sup> Thereafter, most of its pepper was transported by Chinese junks to Saigon-Cholon via Hà Tiên, although some Hainanese junks still loaded pepper to sell in Hainan or Singapore. The junks from Siam that had previously dominated this trade found themselves excluded because of the new tax and customs’ regime. From the 1890s, direct commercial relations with the Malay States, Singapore, Bangkok and Hainan became rare, but they still existed, especially as illicit trade.<sup>56</sup>

In order to stimulate declining pepper production in the Transbassac and southern Cambodia, in the 1890s the French government opened the Metropolitan market to Indochinese pepper at preferential tariffs. The total value of this “present from the motherland to the colony” was estimated at seven million French francs annually. Growers in Siam saw a chance to make money from the new system, so Chinese junks began to smuggle pepper to this wider Transbassac coastal area, to profit from the preferential regime. Once this was discovered, the authorities sought to retaliate by tightening control of pepper plantations and their trade. To control the Cambodian coast would have required several new posts, manned with European customs officers, but, in the end, financial reasons and the “unhealthy climate” saw only one eventuate, in 1897, manned by a single European officer.<sup>57</sup> Its results were hardly overwhelming. Even so, the Hanoi-based *Direction des Douanes et Régies* rejected Kampot Resident Leclère’s argument that the liberalisation of the pepper trade and its opening to

<sup>52</sup> Leclère, Rapport sur mon voyage à Romang Chol, 17 mai 1887. ANC, RSC 5,955.

<sup>53</sup> *Monographie de la province d’Ha Tiên*. Saigon: Imprimerie L.Ménard 1901, p. 60.

<sup>54</sup> Leclère, Kampot, 19 septembre 1889. ANC, RSC 5,938

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Leclère, Histoire de Kampot et de la rébellion de cette province de 1885-1887. ANC, RSC 5,181. See also the abridged version, “L’insurrection de Kampot en 1885”, *Etudes Cambodgiennes*, 9 (1967), pp. 23-38.

<sup>57</sup> Rapport au Gouverneur Général de l’Indochine, 27 janvier 1897 au sujet de la création de nouveaux bureaux de Douane et Régies dans le Golfe de Siam. ANC, RSC 2,595.

Southeast Asia were the only effective measures for increasing production and stopping fraud and contraband.<sup>58</sup>

Chinese also settled on some of the smaller and larger islands in the Gulf of Siam. In 1887, for instance, there was a colony of Chinese pepper planters, approximately thirty houses, on the small island of Koh Kor opposite of Koh Rung. Their small junks mainly communicated with Kampot. On another nearby island, Koh Padaon, fifteen Chinese fishermen and peasants lived, all married to Cambodian women. They grew rice for their own consumption and sold their products, officially poultry and fish, in Hà Tiên and Rạch Giá.<sup>59</sup>

Given all the circumstances described, it is not surprising that the French never managed to stamp out the illicit trade and illegal immigration networks that linked the Transbassac and Cambodian coast with Singapore, Siam, and the Malay Peninsula. These networks were interwoven with illicit activities of real political, administrative and economic importance to local people, as the later example of the smuggling of cotton and silk shows. In 1931, as the Great Depression was striking Indochina, French textile companies complained officially about illegal imports of Indian cotton and Chinese silk goods, transported by Chinese junks from Singapore and Bangkok to the small ports of the Transbassac (especially to Hà Tiên, Rạch Giá, Cà Mau, Bạc Liêu, and Sóc Trăng), and thence along a thousand waterways into the rest of Cochinchina. The governor of Cochinchina promptly ordered the temporary closure of those harbours and organised raids on their markets, causing contraband immediately to fall by 75 percent. But, as provincial administrators complained, there were negative economic consequences. Local products from their provinces, like dried fish, charcoal, and duck feathers, had normally been exchanged for the smuggled silk and cotton fabric, whose suppression thus impacted badly on the local handicraft industries. The Customs' Directorate in Saigon, however, was not impressed. It responded with sceptical pragmatism about the long-term effects of the ban: the Cochinchinese, and especially Cambodian, coastline was very difficult to control, it argued, so that illicit trade would easily seep through other channels.<sup>60</sup> Whether local industries in the Transbassac could survive the redirection of this black market commerce was none of its concern.

We now turn from geo-political and economic circumstances of the wider region to consider banditry in western Cochinchina.

### **Chinese and Vietnamese Banditry in the Transbassac**

In 1895, the Cochinchinese governor reported armed gangs were robbing the trading junks that used the waterways of the Transbassac to communicate with the larger markets, especially Cholon. According to him, a "flood of new immigrants" had arrived from Hong Kong after the French had lifted a temporary ban on Chinese immigration from the British colony that had been prompted by a plague outbreak there. Such mass migrations always brought a large contingent of "unruly people" amid the newcomers.<sup>61</sup> Nevertheless, this was only one of many reports of piracy in the last decade of the nineteenth and the first decade of the twentieth centuries, mainly in the Transbassac but also, to a minor degree, in the Cisbassac. This piracy was largely related to the harvest cycle, with most occurrences reported after the first harvest (from February to June) when junks and boats transported the rice to the river markets and from there to Cholon. The second harvest, in October, attracted a recrudescence of piracy as well.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Administration des Douanes et Régies de l'Indochine. No. 271/h. M. A. Frezouls, Directeur des Douanes et Régies de l'Indo-Chine à M. le Gouverneur Général à Hanoi. Hanoi, 18 mars 1900. ANC, RSC 4,785.

<sup>59</sup> Résidence de Kampot. Objet: Rapport sur une voyage à Kompong Trach. 24 mars 1887. ANC, RSC 5,956.

<sup>60</sup> Fermeture du port de Camau avec importations au long cours, 1931. In QG II, Goucoch. 2,862.

<sup>61</sup> Lieutenant-Gouverneur de la Cochinchine, M. Duros, à M. le Gouverneur Général. Rapport du mois d'octobre, 1895. AOM, Indo., Gouvernement Générale (hereafter Gougal) 64,321.

<sup>62</sup> Lieutenant-Gouverneur à M. le Gouverneur Général, Saigon 23 mars 1891. AOM, Indo., Gougal. 64,317.

The colonial archives contain numerous examples, of which the following from 1891 are typical. In February that year, for instance, an armed gang of ten Teochiu Chinese attacked the market of Ô Môn (Cần Thơ province), but had to retreat empty-handed after meeting with resistance. Then in March the vice-administrator (*sous-chef*) of Bảo Thuận canton (Bến Tre province) fell victim to a gang of twenty armed Chinese, who stole 3,500 piastres and a small gun, but without causing any further damage. In Sóc Trăng during the same month a similar attack resulted in the death of the victim, presumably by the same gang. Meanwhile, also in March, another gang of thirteen Chinese from Saigon attacked the village hall (*đình*) of the Chinese pottery manufacturing village of Lái Thiêu, stealing 583 piastres. In this case, the authorities managed to apprehend one suspect shortly afterwards, but found no trace of the main culprits.<sup>63</sup>

In 1893, the administrator of Sóc Trăng reported a strong influx of Chinese migrants into his province: from March to May alone, 700 Chinese from all the locally represented dialect groups had entered the province, although the vast majority were Teochiu.<sup>64</sup> That year, Sóc Trăng and neighbouring Bạc Liêu, together with the province of Cần Thơ further up the Bassac River, were the areas most affected by piracy. Their comparatively large surface area and low population densities, combined with easy river and coastal communications, ensured that malefactors could disappear long before any official response could occur. The administration created a corps of night watchmen, in the hopes of countering the bandits' advantages, but they remained largely ineffective. Their inefficiency, lack of interest and general inadequacy arose mainly, it was thought, because the local notables, who ruled over their villages, had insisted the watchers carry out other work in the daytime as well. Of course, the scheme may have failed because the tenant farmers, who made up these militias and who were dependant on the wealthier land-owners, had no economic interest in serving their masters at night, as well as during the day, without any compensation. As very poor men, they had much less to fear from the robbers. Whatever the reason, the failure of the local patrols later caused French administrators to seek funding for mobile police brigades, to be supplied with motorised boats and modern weapons.<sup>65</sup>

Piracy in the Transbassac peaked from 1901 until 1903, with reports from all western provinces about the continued activities of well-organised and well-armed gangs. For instance, one gang led by a certain Huỳnh Văn An, and two brothers with the family name of Trương, controlled the Sóc Trà canal and levied transit taxes on the boats passing by. Gang members also traded in smuggled lumber, and in kidnapped women, the later an activity which points to the demographic imbalance in this newly opened land. After Huỳnh Văn An was arrested and sentenced to fifteen years in prison, the area briefly regained its tranquillity. However, when he managed to escape from Cần Thơ provincial prison, the gang's activities resumed.<sup>66</sup>

All the Transbassac provinces mentioned so far had become, since the last decade of the nineteenth century, centres of mounting economic activities. The colonial administration increased the tempo of canal digging, road building and harbour creation, as new markets were founded and land concessions allocated. Land concessions were, in principle, only available to French and "naturalized" Vietnamese landowners, but the Chinese managed to obtain land through indirect means, especially through their Vietnamese wives and their half-Vietnamese offspring.<sup>67</sup> So feverish was the pace of

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> See *Rapports mensuels de la Cochinchine*, 1893. AOM, Indo., Gougal. 64,319.

<sup>65</sup> See *Rapports mensuels de la Cochinchine*, 1902. AOM, Indo., Gougal. 64,324.

<sup>66</sup> See *Ibid.* The nationality of the gang members was not reported. As the French used Vietnamese diacritics when writing Chinese names, the leaders could have been Chinese or Vietnamese.

<sup>67</sup> As a general rule, the largest concessions belonged to French companies or individuals (either French or indigenous) with French citizenship, who owned a limited number of very large, large or medium-sized

development and so low the population that even Chinese, whose special taxation status had exempted them from forced labour requirements, might now be “invited”, as the archival documents put it, to participate “voluntarily” in these public works due to a temporary labour shortage.<sup>68</sup>

By 1909, the danger of piracy had already been reduced substantially. Economic development in the Transbassac had ensured that the mobile police units, requested back in 1902, had been put in place locally. As the governor of Cochinchina reported proudly, new armed police posts (*postes de gendarmerie*) had been established at crucial points, like crossroads, the junctions of rivers and canals, and isolated islands, or in other areas that had been especially prone to piracy. These posts allowed greater mobility in the pursuit of criminal gangs. Motorized boats also patrolled the rivers and canals, day and night. The local peasant population, increasingly confident that the authorities could protect them, had begun refusing to pay off the gangs, and in some cases even helped the authorities, either by resisting attacks or by denouncing and capturing bandits.<sup>69</sup>

But the governor’s optimism was premature. Only one month later, new reports of piracy appeared. However, this time the only areas affected were those with large Teochiu Chinese populations, especially in the Transbassac provinces of Sóc Trăng, Cần Thơ and Bạc Liêu. One Chinese gang there, reported as particularly dangerous, contained twenty armed men, and had hideouts on several small, uninhabited islands in the Bassac River mouth. They attacked Chinese merchant junks and demanded protection money from villages in the area. It required a concerted police operation by the three neighbouring provinces (Sóc Trăng, Cần Thơ, and Trà Vinh) before the gang was finally destroyed, although many members were still able to flee. Nevertheless, the administrator of Sóc Trăng argued, it remained absolutely necessary to improve communications in this far-off area, which was still largely populated by Khmer. In Sóc Trăng itself, however, there were too few labourers for such essential public works, as concession owners refused to “lend” their tenants to work on them. (Only the Chinese merchants of the river port of Bãi Xấu formed an honourable exception to this lack of civic mindedness, as they supplied both the funds and labour to build a new quay, canal and mole.) As the provincial administrator urged in his report, only an increase in land roads, day and night control of the waterways, the creation of new administrative districts, and the motorization of the gendarmerie could hope to solve the piracy problem in the Transbassac.<sup>70</sup>

The coastal province of Rạch Giá did not escape the general plague of banditry at this time. In the first years of the twentieth century, a gang of robbers, led by a Vietnamese named Lê Văn Lợi, terrorised Rạch Giá. They were especially active in the district of Gò Quao, where numerous river arms, canals, marshes and jungles created innumerable possibilities for hideouts and safe escapes. As the archives show, it was not only economic necessity but also the complicated local security situation that forced the administration to increase its program to dig new canals in the affected areas here, with the lieutenant-governor of Cochinchina declaring to the governor-general that Rạch

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properties. Indigenous or foreign Asian (mainly Chinese) proprietors owned very few large holdings, but many medium-sized and small plantations. By 1938, for example, there were 52 small “foreign Asian” land owners in Sóc Trăng, whose properties did not exceed twenty hectares, among them forty-eight Chinese and four Indians, against 196 small indigenous owners. However, given their family names, many of the “indigenous” owners probably had Chinese ancestry (Diệp, Giang, Kiêm, Lâm, Liễu, Ông, Quách, Tào, Thâm, Vũ, etc). *Indochine. Adresses 1938-1939*. Saigon: Imprimerie Albert Portail 1938, pp.1005-013. Land policies changed over time, but normally Foreign Asians (Chinese, Indians and so on) were not allowed to own large concessions, and had to register them in the names of their Vietnamese wives or mestizo sons. See, for instance, Rachgia, Chef de province à M. le Gouverneur de la Cochinchine, 22 juillet 1937. QG II, 1211.

<sup>68</sup> See Rapports mensuels de la Cochinchine, 1902. AOM, Indo., Gougal. 64,324

<sup>69</sup> See Rapports mensuels de la Cochinchine, 1909. AOM, Indo., Gougal, 64,330

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

Giá was effectively cut off from the rest of the colony by the difficulty of communicating with it.<sup>71</sup> After the canals were dug, just as in other regions of the Transbassac, the administrative structures of the colonial Cochinchinese countryside were immediately extended to the newly cultivated areas. This included the creation of rural communities, village councils (*conseils des notables*) and the building of communal halls (*đình*), partly financed by the administration. For the Chinese population it meant the introduction of the congregation system into the most remote corner of Indochina.

We now turn to secret societies, as opposed to banditry or failed rebels turned criminals, in the illicit fringe world of early colonial Cochinchina.

### **Secret Societies Among the Chinese and Vietnamese**

By the 1880s, French authorities had begun to worry about unlawful activities that had few, if any, links with political opposition to French rule. Criminal gangs seemed to be on the rise in Cochinchina, as we shall see shortly. But this illicit activity was not simply a factor of opportunity and terrain; it must also be seen within the context of a series of legal or formerly legal social vices of the times, in particular the “three social evils” of opium smoking, gambling, and organised prostitution. By the late 1880s and early 1890s, the local administration was seriously concerned about several shady activities. Chinese-run gambling boats reached every corner of Cochinchina, while the casinos in Cholon, which had operated legally for some time under the pretence of being Chinese clubs, or mutual assistance organizations (*cercles d'entraide mutuelle chinois*)—and in which all official Chinese dialect groups had their stake—refused to disappear after the clubs were abolished. Instead, clandestine gambling dens flourished, and were often associated with brothels in the provincial centres. All this caused French authorities great concern. Critics feared the development of a shadow economy and even of a state within the state. French policies had fluctuated from the 1860s between toleration of such activities for the sake of the colonial budget and varying degrees of prohibition. The final answer to this threat came in 1882 when the first civilian governor, Le Myre de Vilers, tightened the rules concerning these three “social evils” throughout Cochinchina. His legislation was later extended to the whole of Indochina, but legislation alone was hardly enough to address these problems.

Le Myre de Vilers also tightened the rules regarding Chinese immigrants, rules that were perhaps the strictest in the whole of Southeast Asia at the time. “Foreign Asians”, of whom the Chinese were always the great majority, who were charged with comparatively minor offences like membership in secret societies were now liable to immediate and permanent expulsion from Indochina, and in major cases their property might also be confiscated. In addition, the *congrégations* to which they belonged might be heavily fined. In a major suppression of secret societies in Cochinchina the Governor ordered the following penalties in 1881-82: the Teochiu congregations of Cholon, Cần Thơ, Trà Vinh and Vĩnh Long had to contribute 5,000 piastres towards the general suppression of piracy in the countryside; while in Sóc Trăng, the 3,000 piastre costs associated with raising an additional police force of 30 men were imposed on the Teochiu congregations of Sóc Trăng, Bãi Xâu and Bạc Liêu. One particular village, Tân Quới in Cần Thơ, was fined 2,000 piastres for proven participation in the activities of the Heaven and Earth Society.<sup>72</sup>

Once proven, criminal charges were punished according to the law; but even in these cases, as long as there were no capital crimes involved, the authorities often favoured expulsion over long and costly incarceration. Only the principal Chinese offenders and Vietnamese affiliates were sent to prison, often on the island of Poulou

<sup>71</sup> Lieutenant-Gouverneur Ducos à M. le Gouverneur Général. AOM, Indo., Gougal, 64,322.

<sup>72</sup> See Le Myre de Vilers, 19 juin 1882. AOM, Indo., NF, 31,449.

Condore.<sup>73</sup> In addition, Le Myre de Vilers introduced a judicial reform in 1882. In Biên Hòa, Mỹ Tho, Bến Tre, Vĩnh Long, Châu Đốc, magistrates courts were created, presided over by French officials who were supposed to have fluent Vietnamese and a good knowledge of local culture and society. Their goal was to effectively supervise the indigenous section of the administration, whose mandarins and interpreters had only too often, it was feared, co-operated with the culprits.<sup>74</sup>

Early French efforts at control were hardly successful. The Heaven and Earth Society, divided into two rival branches, Nghĩa Hòa and Nghĩa An, remained very strong, especially among Teochiu and Hokkien speakers. The Hokkien congregation was numerically small, but counted the wealthiest Chinese among its members. According to the French archival documents I have seen so far, they were not regarded as a particular danger to law and order. The abolition of their societies' activities was more a matter of economic wisdom, as far as their operation of revenue farms, especially the opium monopoly, was concerned, and thus more a matter of political principle than of urgent necessity.<sup>75</sup> The Teochiu case was different, however. They worked as rice merchants in Cholon and as middlemen in the Cochinchina countryside, but were also represented among the peasantry in the Transbassac, and all readily married Vietnamese and Khmer wives. Under these circumstances the spread of their secret society organizations within Cochinchina and Cambodia, and their extension to the "natives", was not astonishing, and was greeted with suspicion and fear by the colonial authorities who even anticipated a secret "Asian Internationale"<sup>76</sup> *avant la lettre*. In 1882, therefore, after disturbances in the countryside during the dry season, the governor decided on a show of force to deal with this emerging threat. The Transbassac provinces of Rạch Giá, Bạc Liêu and Sóc Trăng were the principal targets of repression. Le Myre de Vilers visited the area and personally directed the measures against gang-related Chinese (or Teochiu) crime.

In his 1882 report to Paris, Le Myre de Vilers demanded new taxes to pay for works to bring the Transbassac, and especially the Cà Mau peninsula, under full government control. This area was peopled by Vietnamese, Chinese, Khmer and Minh Hương, and it enjoyed easy maritime connections with China and other states of the region. Since early times it had been a safe haven for Chinese criminals, troublemakers, and layabouts, and for refugees from other Cochinchinese provinces. This unruly population showed a tendency to join secret societies, which acted in place of the governmental structures that were not yet fully present in these areas, where it was feared Frenchmen could not withstand the unhealthy climate. As the governor argued, undertaking sanitary measures in the provincial centres to eradicate mosquitoes, digging canals for agriculture, and extending village communities and Chinese congregations, were all necessary to bring these unruly spots under full control.<sup>77</sup>

In my view, these actions were not specifically anti-Chinese or reflecting fear of Chinese influences on Vietnamese culture, as others have concluded.<sup>78</sup> Two explanations seem to be important. First of all, the French administration feared a combination of traditional piracy and banditry, seeing secret societies as a new form of anti-governmental organization and thus anti-colonial. This was the case of the Teochiu and their related organizations, who acted in close connivance with the native

<sup>73</sup> For this topic see Engelbert, 2002, pp. 192-204.

<sup>74</sup> *Ministre de la Marine et des Colonies, Rapport au Président de la République Française, 25 Mai 1881 AOM, Indo., NF, carton 31,449.*

<sup>75</sup> On the opium policy, see Descours-Gatin, Chantal. *Quand l'opium finançait la colonisation en Indochine*. Paris: L'Harmattan, 1992; Guerneur, Henri. *Le régime fiscal de l'Indochine*. Paris: L'Harmattan 1999 (first published 1909).

<sup>76</sup> See *Affaire des congrégations chinoise de Triêu-Châu, 1882. QG II, Cochinchine, IA 15/155 (17)*. I am grateful to Tracy Barrett for sharing this document with me.

<sup>77</sup> *Le Myre de Vilers à M. le Ministre de la Marine et des Colonies. 12 juin 1882. AOM, Indo., NF 31,449.*

<sup>78</sup> See, for instance, Descours-Gatin, 1992, p. 90.

populations. Secondly, the measures were directed against a Chinese, and especially Hokkien, grip on the economy. Le Myre de Vilers inherited from his naval predecessors a tax system based on state monopolies ceded to Chinese revenue farm holders: the opium revenue farm alone contributed 20 percent of the colony's total budget. If France's destiny was to develop her colonial possessions in the Far East, funding was necessary. Since Paris would not supply it, capital had to be found locally. This meant increased taxes for Cochinchina's "milk cows", the Chinese,<sup>79</sup> a development which hardly greeted with joy by the concerned part of the population.<sup>80</sup> To extend the rice growing area, and replace Chinese-run revenue farms by state monopolies (*régies*) on opium and alcohol, were the governor's answers to these burning questions of the time. The new government monopolies might still be run by Chinese subcontractors, but the French knew the Chinese did not form a single bloc. In particular, Teochiu were the sworn enemies of Hokkiens, especially where control of the rice trade was concerned, in an animosity that probably went back to before to 1882, when the latter had controlled commerce in agricultural as a sideline benefit of their opium farm outlets.<sup>81</sup> The suppression of secret societies and the severe control of immigration must also be seen within this wider context. The French wanted to increase revenues but also to show that they were the masters.<sup>82</sup>

Where secret societies themselves were concerned, criminal activities like extortion and robbery might be intertwined with political motivations, as the following case of the Heaven and Earth Society in Tân Quý village (Cần Thơ province) shows. Archival documents provide a rare insight into the structure and methods of this organization here. This market village comprised mainly Teochiu rice traders and farmers, as well as Vietnamese peasants. In June 1882, a Vietnamese notable, Phạm Văn Vui, had refused to join the Heaven and Earth Society and was subsequently threatened with death. The verdict was hung openly in the village pagoda, signed by "đội vệ sĩ lãnh binh" (captain, commander of the troops). Phạm Văn Vui demanded the help of the authorities. A wealthy Teochiu peasant and trader, Trần Ngãi, was presumed to be the founder of the provincial Heaven and Earth Society. He had lived in the colony for ten years and had married a Vietnamese with whom he had five children. Trần Ngãi owned 100 hectares of land in Cần Thơ and Sóc Trăng Provinces, three houses, and two river boats. A search of his estate uncovered a secret society seal hidden in a pile of rice near the bed of a coolie who transported rice to Cholon and knew that the brother of the accused, the previous owner of the river boats, had left for China. Trần Ngãi refused to cooperate with the authorities, so his immediate expulsion was ordered and the seizure of all his possessions. Only his wife and children were allowed to remain.<sup>83</sup> It seems nevertheless most likely that the authorities had only expelled a captain, not a general of the society.

<sup>79</sup> From 1876 until 1885 alone, there were 18 circulars announcing changes in the taxation of Chinese (poll tax, *patentes*, immatriculation papers, and special taxes, e.g. for Cholon). See Lafargue, 1909, p. 67. It was a delicate experiment, to see how far they could go without damaging both the economy and Chinese immigration.

<sup>80</sup> The increase in administrative control, taxes and corvée was also the main reason for increased activities of secret societies and Chinese rebellions in Dutch Borneo, where even native Dayaks joined the rebels. See Somers-Heidhues, Mary. *Golddiggers, Farmers and Traders in the "Chinese districts" of West Kalimantan, Indonesia*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University SEAP Papers 2003, pp. 108-112, 181-82.

<sup>81</sup> Gouvernement de la Cochinchine. *Cochinchine Française. Rapport au Conseil Colonial. Année 1880*. Saigon : Imprimerie Coloniale 1880, p. 21.

<sup>82</sup> See Engelbert, 2002, pp. 185-204. It is noteworthy that, in the 1870s and 1880s, the three major colonial powers in Southeast Asia, (British, French, and Dutch), took measures to tighten control of Chinese immigration, to increase revenue from Chinese, and contain secret societies. Rising immigration connected with colonial development created new challenges that had to be met. For the British policies in Singapore, see Jackson R.N., *Pickering: Protector of Chinese*. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1965.

<sup>83</sup> Béliard au Gouverneur en Conseil Privé. Saigon, 17 juin 1882. AOM, Indo., NF, 31,449.

In 1904, documents show that the Yellow Flag branch (Kèo Vàng) of the society, which was particularly strong among the Teochiu, wanted to control the Transbassac rice trade and make new members among the Vietnamese. In Trà ôn (Cần Thơ province), the authorities discovered Teochiu rice peddlers spreading false rumours from village to village, saying the rice price had fallen sharply because of the Japanese victory over the Russians. Furthermore, they added, the Japanese were now free to come to Cochinchina to chase off the French colonialists. After the victory, Heaven and Earth adherents would be given honours, titles and wealth, including the possessions of the departed French. Vietnamese at all levels of the population flocked to the organization—some from economic or political reasons, others, especially the wealthier, out of fear. Rice was being sold at ridiculously low prices, forcing poorer people to buy rice for their own consumption after selling their crop. Members of the lowest classes of society, outcasts and criminals, were also using the protective umbrella of the society to pursue illicit activities. As “sworn brothers”, they knew their fellow-brethren would not dare to report them to the authorities, especially if village heads and rich peasants were fellow members.<sup>84</sup> French sources consulted so far do not say that the organization or its leaders were responsible for major criminal activities like robbery and banditry. Rather, a wall of silence within the organization prevented the French from apprehending the principal leaders, who were presumed to be among the leading Teochiu rice merchants whose networks and relations possibly reached as far as China. However, as much recruitment was among the poor and anti-social elements of the countryside, a tendency towards crime was not surprising.

The spread of secret societies among the Vietnamese continued at the turn of the century, and not only in areas with a high degree of Chinese penetration like the Transbassac. According to archival documents, mostly drawn from eastern Cochinchinese provinces<sup>85</sup>, the processes were similar to the Transbassac situation described above. Vietnamese secret associations were often established by individuals drawn from the ranks of the wealthier peasantry, seeking economic or social control. They levied contributions on their members according to an individual’s personal situation (from three to fifty Indochinese piastres per year), with the funds used to cover judicial costs or the needs of the families of arrested members. Those unwilling to join were threatened with retaliation, while fear kept many rich or “honest” peasants out of official administrative functions, like village heads or notables, leaving them open to affiliates. With the village leadership consequently supporting them, secret society gangs sprang up which could act almost unhindered by the local authorities, as nobody dared to report them. Thus in the bright light of day, gangs appeared in the markets of Cholon province in 1905 to demand protection money from cowed traders.<sup>86</sup>

In this province, as in Biên Hòa in 1906, where a Vietnamese secret society terrorized the villages along the railway to Phan Thiết, Chinese secret society members acted as teachers of the Vietnamese. Secret society members of social rank appeared in the villages, with four or five thugs in tow, to “invite” the wealthier peasants to form a cell, with the threat of death or the burning of their houses to encourage those who hesitated. When about fifty people had been induced to join, they were then gathered together for an initiation ceremony, usually held at night in a village temple or pagoda. The initiates swore a blood oath (*thích huyết*), and then the formula of the society was read out over the corpse of a black chicken: “Anyone who betrays his brothers will be

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<sup>84</sup> See AOM, Indo., NF 21,535. I am grateful to Nola Cooke for having shared this document with me.

<sup>85</sup> Similar reports exist from Long Xuyên and Rạch Giá (Transbassac). See Engelbert, 2002, pp. 192-203.

<sup>86</sup> Bien Hoa. Rapport politique de la province pour les mois de Mai et Juin 1906. QG II, II A 45/295 (1)

beheaded like this animal”.<sup>87</sup> The masters of these ceremonies were often Chinese—in Biên Hòa they were Hakka—who were well versed in the rituals.<sup>88</sup>

In the Biên Hòa branch of the Heaven and Earth Society, three of the four leaders, the so-called “Four Greats” (*Tứ Đại*), were Hakka, and one was Vietnamese. Beneath them came a “Bách Xin” or “Tiên”, a Vietnamese village notable, several teachers (*thầy*) of the rituals, a justice of the peace, and a treasurer. Finally there was a band of thugs and enforcers, called the “Five Tigers” (*Ngũ Hổ*), who were responsible for recruiting new members. Rich peasants were usually able to get away with cash payments only, whereas ordinary members were organised into three armies: the black, red, and yellow flags. Every member had his own military rank, ranging from colonels and captains down to sergeants and simple recruits. At night, the society held meetings in the villages, where members were trained in the martial arts. As a result of this secret society activity, a whole new seditious movement sprang up quietly and spread like wild fire. For some months, French authorities were unable to arrest suspects, as they met with total silence in the villages concerned. If administrators might proudly claim in one monthly report that their respective jurisdictions were absolutely peaceful, a month later a new unsolved crime, robbery or attack would sully their record. When French and Vietnamese military units returned empty-handed from their policing expeditions, it enormously increased the prestige of the societies. Soon whole villages were involved.<sup>89</sup>

Finally, anonymous letters awakened the suspicions of the provincial authorities and concerted arrests and searches uncovered evidence of the society’s activities. Only after this, when canton or village heads and rich peasants felt sufficiently protected by the authorities, did villages resist the demands of the societies and thus make it possible to target the evil at its roots. In Biên Hòa in 1906, the French arrested more than one hundred secret society gang members, ninety-eight of whom were sentenced to prison terms ranging from four days to four years. The main culprits launched an appeal, only to find their sentence doubled.<sup>90</sup>

The problem of Chinese and Vietnamese secret societies and the potential political threat posed, especially by the latter, still occupied the authorities until the early 1920s.<sup>91</sup> However, their main hiding places in the Mekong Delta and along the coast were now largely under surveillance, so that successful pursuit of those outside the law was at least theoretically possible. For the authorities, once aware of the problem, what mattered most was to create an elaborate system of control and secret police to catch up with new developments and to nip illicit activities in the bud. Consequently over the years the number of reports on such activities began to grow, from their small beginnings in the early 1880s and later 1890s Transbassac. By the 1900s, reports of such activities were appearing for Biên Hòa and then, in the early 1910s, along the Cochinchina–Cambodia border, indicating not so much a sign of intense criminality but rather of heightened police awareness and activities. So, if banditry continued here and

<sup>87</sup> The blood oath ritual and its Daoist background are explained by Ter Haar, Barend J. *Ritual and Mythology of the Chinese Triads*. Leiden/Boston/Köln: Brill, 1998, pp.151-79

<sup>88</sup> One may ask why the Hakka tried to form a secret society with the Vietnamese rather than join existing Chinese societies or form one of their own. Their small numbers and inferior economic and social position may be the reason.

<sup>89</sup> Hồ Sơn Đài. “Về một tháng mở đầu cuộc kháng chiến chống Pháp” [On the first month of the anti-French struggle], in *Mùa thu rồi, ngày hăm ba*. [Words in autumn], T. 2, Hà Nội: NXB Chính trị quốc gia, 1996, pp. 192-198.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>91</sup> Party historian Trần Huy Liệu claimed the Vietnamese Heaven and Earth Society had “several thousand” members organised in formations (*kéo*) of 50 participants, although without saying if these formations acted autonomously or as branches of a centralized organization. The French only finally suppressed it in 1924–1926. *Cách mạng cận đại Việt Nam* [The modern Vietnamese revolution], T. 3. Hà Nội: Ban nghiên cứu văn sử địa, 1956, pp. 118-22.

there, it was increasingly being dealt with more efficiently, as bandits and outlaws were caught and brought to trial. From the turn of the twentieth century, too, the authorities also tightened their grip on highland minority areas as, in principle, no place was to be beyond government control. Assisting in this result, from the late 1910s parts of the highlands also became increasingly integrated into the colonial economy.

However, beginning with the Chinese revolution in 1911, a new threat loomed around the corner—modern nationalism. Spread by a class of young and western educated intellectuals or “semi-intellectuals”, as French authorities often considered them, they recruited supporters among the common people, especially the urban workers and the rural poor. Suppressing these new political threats, and not incidents of traditional banditry or rebellion, became the main focus of colonial policing in the following decades. A real “Asian Internationale” was now in the making from around 1920, but it would still take some time to take shape.

As it has been shown above, the reasons for banditry and piracy in the Transbassac and along the Vietnam–Cambodia maritime coast were not matters of ethnic particularity but a response to a multitude of traditional geo-strategic factors that characterised this area, and created the “objective” bases for such activities. Large areas of the Transbassac and its extended coastal zone were undeveloped, but easy accessible through a tangle of waterways that were difficult to control and where hideouts and ambushes could be easily organised. Furthermore there was, as far as Chinese piracy was concerned, the proximity of Cambodia, Siam and the traditional pirate islands in the Gulf of Siam.

In terms of Vietnamese settlement, the area that became French Cochinchina was only comparatively recently settled, and its population had always been mobile.<sup>92</sup> In the marshes and swamps—the traditional hiding places in Cochinchina—as well as in barren or hilly areas, marginal people like drifters might often join isolated government opponents, perhaps previously members of anti-colonial uprisings or rebellions whose activities had later degenerated into banditry. Among those arrested in Biên Hòa in 1906, for instance, the French found several unemployed men, former soldiers of the colonial *tirailleurs*, and a seaman invalided out of the colonial navy, among the “enforcers” (*ngũ hổ*) of the provincial secret society.<sup>93</sup> In the 1930s and 1940s, such people would be sought out and recruited by nationalist activists and clandestine insurgents of all political colours, especially Vietnamese Communists, rather than by secret societies.

As the sources from several Cochinchinese provinces have shown, whereas the followers of a gang might be poor, hungry, and illiterate peasants, the leaders were not. They did not necessarily belong to the established wealthy and traditional ruling classes of rural society, as such people members would tend to align themselves with the official power and join a criminal society only out of fear. The leaders of criminal gangs and secret societies, as the examples from Sóc Trăng and Biên Hòa show, were more likely new-comers in the established societal web or in a social fabric which was just about to emerge in a new land. They created their own prestige and a following through respect and a paternalistic care for their fellow members. With the help of their following, these leaders used intimidation and fear in order to control rural areas economically and politically. Soldiers or sailors who returned from duty to their native villages were ideal instruments, as headmen of armed gangs, “soldier-bandits”, and channels for outside influences. As the examples from Sóc Trăng and Biên Hòa show, the gang leaders were not particularly admired or loved by the population, but respected out of fear and from the lack of an alternative. Where official control was low, weak or discontinued,

<sup>92</sup> See Li Tana, “Introduction”, in *Water Frontier*, 2004, pp. 7-8.

<sup>93</sup> République Française. Province de Bien Hoa. Rapport politique de la province pour les mois de Mai et Juin 1906. QG II, II A 45/295 (1)

native administrators or local community leaders tended to give in to, tolerate or cooperate with these illegal organizations: to call for state intervention was first of all proof of their own impotence, and regarded as troublesome and ineffectual by the community and the local leaders themselves. Only when the state exerted its effective control over temporarily lost (or new) territories could banditry be tackled at its roots by destroying the wall of silence which surrounded and protected it.<sup>94</sup>

If aspects of local customs, political history, and terrain all contributed towards pulling disaffected individuals into socially marginal or outright illegal activities in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, one other attracting factor also needs to be recognized in any account of the increase of illicit activities in this area. This was the increasing economic development of the region, of the Transbassac especially. The number and frequency of rice transports through its canals and rivers continually rose, while a wealthy class of rich Vietnamese and Chinese peasants, village notables, traders, and merchants emerged, all of whom either carried rice, cattle, money, and valuable objects on their boats, or stored them at their homes. If Vietnamese and Chinese migration to the Transbassac created possibilities for landless peasants to improve themselves through the clearing of new lands—at their own expense or, more probably, as tenant farmers of a concession owner—dispossessed or marginal social elements and outcasts from the main ethnic groups who lived there, the Việt, Chinese, and Khmer and people of mixed-blood, also found refuge and, for a while at least, the opportunity to make a living by illicit means.<sup>95</sup>

#### **Epilogue: Some Reflections on Illicit Activities to the End of the Colonial Era**

The Plain of Reeds, stretching to the Vietnam–Cambodia border and thence into eastern Cambodia, the district of Gò Quao in the Transbassac province of Rạch Giá, the interior of Sóc Trăng, the Seven Mountains (*Thất Sơn*) in Châu Đốc, the hills to the north-east of Saigon or the Cochinchina–Cambodia border—all these and many other similar names sound very familiar to somebody researching southern Vietnamese banditry, piracy, uprisings, and anti-regime movements during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In periods of weakened government's control, they would almost immediately become hot spots again. These bandit and outlaw havens would later also play similar roles in the era of armed decolonization, beginning in 1940 with the failed Cochinchina uprising of the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP). However, there was one important difference between the pre-1920 period and thereafter. In the period prior to 1920, it is hard to distinguish purely illicit commerce from political or anti-colonial activities, as they were interwoven. Traditional banditry and piracy could take on a political meaning or political activities degenerate into mere criminality, as the account of Biên Hoa's secret society has shown.

The new movements after 1920—like the Chinese Guomindang, which was strongest in southern Vietnam<sup>96</sup>, the Vietnamese Guomindang (*Việt Nam quốc dân đảng*), which was almost exclusively concentrated among immigrants from the north in Cochinchina, the various politico-religious sects of the south, and the Indochinese Communist Party, among others—still recruited members from the outcasts of society or used the shady connections of traders, bandits, or other criminals. Disbanded members of former gangs could become followers of later millenarian or political organizations, as their local knowledge and their networks were a precious dowry. Criminal practices like extortion or holding the rich to ransom were used by religious or

<sup>94</sup> For similar phenomena in rural China see Billingsley, Philip Richard. *Banditry in China, 1911 to 1928, with particular reference to Honan Province*. Leeds: University of Leeds, PhD thesis, 1974, pp. 3-5.

<sup>95</sup> See also Brocheux, 1995, pp. 22- 29.

<sup>96</sup> See Engelbert, 2002, pp. 217-246, 352-357.

political movements as well. However, if modern movements wanted to be successful outside their well-defined original sphere and gain a nation-wide appeal, they had to hold positive and idealistic rather than commercial goals. In this regard, the Indochinese Communist Party proved to be more sophisticated than its political and religious rivals. Criminals had to be disciplined and renounce to former practises, especially with regard to the common people, the supposed “water” for the guerrilla “fish”.

After the Second World War began in Europe, disturbances broke out in Cochinchina. The French defeat in Europe meant the local colonial administration “lost face”. Rumours spread in the countryside of a new insurrectional movement, like that of the millenarian Phan Xích Long in 1913, while piracy and banditry surged again in all its old Transbassac haunts, like Tri Tôn (Châu Đốc), Long Xuyên, Rạch Giá, Cà Mau, Bạc Liêu and Sóc Trăng in the Transbassac, and also in Sadec, Vĩnh Long, Trà Vinh and Bến Tre in the nearby Cisbassac. In some cases it even reached the surroundings of Saigon, like Gò Vấp. Criminal bands, like the one that infested Châu Đốc and Prey Veng, roamed on both sides of the Cochinchina-Cambodia border. As in earlier times, French individuals were not attacked. Favourite targets were the homes of wealthy Vietnamese peasants and the boats of Chinese traders. As formerly, all main ethnicities were represented in these bands: Vietnamese, Chinese, Khmer and Minh Hương. Armed bands of five to ten people moved at ease on their small boats and canoes and, as in the past, French police and administrators faced difficulties in apprehending the culprits since local watchmen, village notables, and congregation leaders dared not report them,<sup>97</sup> fearing their revenge as the colonial star appeared to wane.

In the first decades of French colonization in the later nineteenth century, anti-French rebels had gathered in the Plain of Reeds. In the repression following the failed 1940 Cochinchina communist uprising, several groups of insurgents fled into the marshes of the Plain of Reeds, as well as slightly north of it to Svay Rieng in eastern Cambodia. In the Plain, the insurgents sheltered with the gang of Phan Văn Kỳ, alias Mười Kỳ. This bandit gang had scourged the area from 1925 until 1937. Despite the leader being arrested for theft on seven occasions, he had always been acquitted for lack of evidence. The communist rebels were also favoured by the climate: heavy rains meant French searches were postponed for several months,<sup>98</sup> enabling them to elude their pursuers.

In the immediate aftermath of the 1945 August Revolution, southern communist leaders, who did not yet possess a military force of their own, had to rely, among others, on the Bình Xuyên, a criminal and political gang who, thanks to their longstanding activities there, knew the Saigon-Cholon area and its outskirts very well.<sup>99</sup> This pattern was reiterated in the period between 1956 and the general uprising of 1959.<sup>100</sup>

<sup>97</sup> See Notes mensuelles sur les activités subversives en Cochinchine. AOM, GG I, 65490.

<sup>98</sup> Notice sur l'activité des intrigues politiques de tendances subversives dans les milieux indigènes de la Cochinchine pendant le mois de juin 1940. AOM, Indo., GG I, 65490.

<sup>99</sup> The Bình Xuyên was originally a criminal gang, based mainly in Cholon and its surroundings. In the initial days of anti-French armed struggle, it formed an army and fought as a nominal Việt Minh ally in the swampy areas south and in the slum areas (*bidonvilles*) northeast of Saigon. Hồ Sơn Đài. “Về một thang mở đầu cuộc kháng chiến”, 1996, pp. 192-198. For a French description, see L'Administrateur-délégué de Tân-Binh à M. l'Administrateur, Chef de Province de Gia-Dinh. Tân-Binh, 19 juillet 1947. AOM, Indo., CP 272. From 1948, some Bình Xuyên under Lê Văn Viễn (Bảy Viễn) changed sides and helped the French to keep Cholon free from the communists. See “Selected Biographies of Vietnamese Army Personnel” in Department of State; Indochina 1945- 1954 Files, Reel 16/44; USMINISTER SAIGON VIETNAM FROM SANA SGD HEATH; JOINT WEEKA 48, 4 DEC 1951, in *Ibid.*, Reel 17/44. See also Devillers, Philippe. *Histoire du Việt-Nam de 1940 à 1952*. Paris: Editions du Seuil 1952, pp. 156, 165-66, 247; and Ngo Van. *Vietnam: 1920-1945. Révolution et contre-révolution sous la domination coloniale*. Paris: L'insomniaque 1986, p. 348.

<sup>100</sup> After President Ngô Đình Diệm forcefully disbanded the sect militias in 1956, several rank and file members of the Bình Xuyên joined the communist Việt Cộng. In 1957, the VC leadership of the south used them to guard their hideouts in Biên Hoa and in the Plain of Reeds. See Hồ Sơn Đài, “Quá trình chuyển hóa

From late 1946 until late 1948, the southern Viet Minh headquarters was located in the midst of the Plain of Reeds (modern Long An). Finally, in late 1948, the arrival of French amphibious armoured cars, which could penetrate the Plain during the dry season, drove the Viet Minh leadership to a new hideout in the mangrove forest of Rạch Giá–Cà Mau. Avoiding the main river routes, which were well guarded by the French, they marched through southeast Cambodia where large areas were already under the control of Khmer Issarak forces formed by the Việt Minh. From Cambodia, the southern leaders crossed to the Seven Mountains (Thất Sơn) in Tri Tôn (Châu Đốc).<sup>101</sup>

During the First Indochina War (1945–1954), the interior of several Transbassac provinces again served as safe havens for the communists, and also for other anti-regime forces that had first fought alongside the Việt Minh, like the Cao Đài sect in Tây Ninh or the Hòa Hảo militias in Long Xuyên, but later turned against them. As in earlier eras, a flourishing junk trade took advantage of the porous Transbassac waterways to smuggle weapons, drugs, and other military items from southern China via the Philippines, or from Siam and Malaya. Transported to the Việt Minh “Liberated Areas”, especially in western Cochinchina, these essential materials were exchanged for rice, pepper, duck feathers, deerskin, and agricultural commodities. Along with several Thai–Vietnamese sea junk captains, Teochiu-speaking junks owners and Hainanese-speaking seamen served as intermediaries between suppliers and clients. In the Việt Minh controlled areas, local Chinese, or their Sino–Vietnamese or Sino–Khmer descendants, helped establish markets and trading co-operatives to facilitate the commerce. Also as in the past, Bangkok and Chantaburi in Thailand, and the islands of Koh Kong off Cambodia and Phú Quốc opposite Hà Tiên, served as transit stations and temporary depots for this illicit trade of Chinese, Sino–Thai, and Sino–Khmer businessmen and women. Kampot pepper was sought both by the French and the Viet Minh. Khmer, Thai, and Philippine generals and politicians, or their families, acted as agents and protectors of the Việt Minh trade networks in Cambodia, Bangkok, and Manila. Chinese with Việt Minh connections in Southeast Asia, for their part, were also able to exploit their close relations with kin in Saigon–Cholon who, in turn, helped to organise Việt Minh trading networks that penetrated deep into the French-controlled areas of Indochina.<sup>102</sup>

So flourishing did this indirect and illicit trade become that it forced both main contenders in the First Indochina War to change their economic policies. The Việt Minh had to accept economic realities and keep the French Indochinese piastre, both for dealings with the outside world, including the French controlled areas, and even in parts of their own liberated areas. Local realities forced the communists to modify or even largely revise policies that had originated long before in Chinese Liberated Zones and were then applied to the areas they controlled in northern and central Vietnam. These policies promoted autarchy, austerity, and a communist economic transformation. In the south, however, the private business and trade upon which the survival of the Việt Minh partly rested had to be accepted as a matter of fact. For their part, in 1952 the French authorities had to lift an earlier ban on rice exports from the Việt Minh controlled Transbassac, facing the unpalatable reality that, first, it had not worked as it had

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một bộ phần vũ trang Bình Xuyên thành lực lượng cách mạng sau năm 1954” [Transforming the Bình Xuyên militia into a revolutionary force after 1954], in *Nghiên cứu Lịch sử* II-IV (1995), pp. 31-36.

<sup>101</sup> See Huỳnh Minh Hiến. “Nhớ Đồng Tháp Mười, “thủ phủ” của Nam Bộ trong những năm đầu kháng chiến” [Commemorating Đồng Tháp Mười, the “capital” of the South in the early years of the First Indochina War] in *Mùa thu rồi, ngày hôm ba*, 1996, pp. 366-375. Like similar publications on Vietnamese revolutionary history, this is undoubtedly a hagiographic and apodictic work aiming to commemorate the August revolution and later communist resistance. However, from the personal memories of the participants we get many valuable details that can be used to check and balance knowledge derived from French archival sources.

<sup>102</sup> For an extensive discussion of this topic, see Engelbert, 2002, pp. 281-497.

opened wide the door to smuggling, and second, it had impacted far too strongly on their own supporters and on the French controlled areas of the Transbassac.<sup>103</sup>

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, then, and despite the changed political and administrative climate, the open coastline and maze of Cochinchina's waterways continued to afford a tempting space in which smuggling, anti-regime, and other illicit activities could flourish, just as at other times in the previous century. And just as in the past, Chinese, and their local Sino-Vietnamese and Sino-Khmer descendants, were able to exploit their contacts throughout the South China Sea to sustain a prosperous black economy.

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<sup>103</sup> See *Ibid.*