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Talking Business Over Tea: The Rise of the Orchard Heartland Gentry (1901-1909)

By

Anthony Morreale

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

History

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Peter Zinoman, Chair

Professor Wen-Hsin Yeh,

Professor Lisandro Claudio

Professor Dylan Riley

Spring 2026

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By

Anthony Morreale

Abstract

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Professor Peter Zinoman, Chair

This dissertation reconstructs the formation of a colonized elite and the anti-Chinese commercial nationalist movement they launched in turn of the century Cochinchina. The movement began in 1901 with the newspaper *Talking Business Over Tea* [*Nông cổ mín đàm*] and culminated in Gilbert Trần Chánh Chiêu's Enlightened Renewal Movement [*Minh Tân*] of 1907–1909. The movement united an elite bloc of Confucian gentry based chiefly in the Orchard Heartlands [*Miệt Vườn*] region of the Mekong Delta with Saigon bureaucrats in a program of commercial and industrial investment aimed at displacing immigrant Asian merchants from the colonial economy. The movement's program was accommodationist toward French rule, not anti-colonial. It became the dominant form of southern Vietnamese nationalism and the direct ancestor of the interwar Constitutionalist Party. However, the movement proved unable to overcome the factional divisions inhering in its constituencies, and it unraveled when rival elites used the colonial police to settle scores.

This dissertation revises orthodox scholarship on colonial Cochinchina in two ways. First, I dispute orthodox scholarship's claims that the French conquest of Cochinchina was unique among the Indochinese territories by requiring the wholesale fashioning of a new elite. Although an important Catholic collaborator elite did develop from the conquest, I find that an old rural elite had largely accommodated to colonial society by the close of the nineteenth century. In so doing, I reveal the hitherto unrecognized class factions that dominated colonial Cochinchina. Second, I dispute orthodox scholarship's claims that the Enlightened Renewal Movement was a surreptitious revolutionary movement that developed fake businesses as front organizations for student travel to Japan. Instead, I argue the business movement was central, and student travel was ancillary. I consequently argue that local political economic transformations were more important than exilic revolutionaries for the period's upsurge of Vietnamese nationalism. In developing this argument, I undertake a sustained criticism of the orthodox historiography, showing it to be what I have termed *Police Historiography*.

To Nani and Papa
One time, in Stockton,
You promised to stick around until I finished school.
But I pushed my luck too far!

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First are my parents Peter and Stephanie, and my sister Natalia. They have been there through thick and thin, and if "thin" is the worse of the two, there has been a lot of "thin". As a child I often saw my father, a criminal defense attorney, spending late nights and early mornings at the dinner table poring over his case files. I imagine he's the source of my passion for research and litigation. More than a few times, they have travelled across the state and around the world just to be with me. They've been beside me through the best and worst. They graciously supported my most bizarre decisions and have made room in their lives for my strange intellectual obsessions. Whatever I've managed wouldn't have been possible without them. I hope they read this one day and it brings a smile to their face.

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Around this time, I met my advisor, Peter Zinoman. A comprehensive list of all the times he exceeded expectations would fill a second dissertation. He may not remember this, but long before starting my graduate work I sent him emails asking about this or that aspect of Vietnam. Looking back, some of these emails would have been more easily resolved with a simple Google search! But even then, he responded thoughtfully and patiently. Later, he took a chance on me as a graduate student from an unorthodox background. I suppose he saw a passion for the country,

language and history, but insofar as I've developed any skills as a researcher and writer, his stubborn labor was responsible. He closely read my work, gave detailed comments, and made himself constantly available for both coaching and encouragement. He never enforced an interpretive line. He allowed me to explore unorthodox topics and methods, but he did so while being continuously honest and engaged. He has been a model of frank leadership, a rare and often taken-for-granted quality in a world where the safest tack is lazy flattery and polite indifference. Criticism is hard work! He should know that my peers in the program often expressed their envy: many of them had only spoken to their advisor a handful of times, and a couple of them never received any written feedback on their work. Thank you.

To Nguyễn Nguyệt Cầm, I owe you all the credit for my love of Vietnamese literature. I don't know if you remember, but long ago as an M.A. student I dove headfirst into your advanced Vietnamese literature course. The course was filled with heritage speakers, and you built it around a close reading *Truyện Kiều*. It's no exaggeration to say that I initially understood maybe 5% of the material. I intended to drop the course, but your passion for the text saturated the classroom. It was so contagious that I stuck around, pretending to understand, and thereby slowly acclimated to the text. That class was a pivotal moment in my development as a reader and thinker. I would have shriveled in the hands of a less passionate teacher and scholar.

There have been a host of other professors who contributed to this dissertation. I hope they will forgive me for lumping them into a paragraph here. I've gained most substantially from Dylan Riley and Wen-Hsin Yeh's seminars and writing. Their influence appears throughout the dissertation. Lisandro Claudio has provided valuable feedback on the chapters, for which I am grateful. Charles Keith and Christopher Goscha have also supported me with encouragement and resources over the course of this project. Liam Kelley and Shawn McHale have indirectly shaped this work through social media conversations. Liam especially deserves thanks for organizing the Engaging Vietnam conference series, which graciously accepted my earliest, roughest work. Pascal Bourdeaux was kind enough to host me in his seminar in Paris. He probably doesn't know it, but long before we met, his short study on Sơn Nam played a formative role on my development as both a historian and literary translator. Edward Miller, Pierre Asselin, David Biggs and Alec Holcombe have also provided valuable encouragement and advice at key points. Lastly, members of the Vietnamese studies listserv have tolerated my combativeness and provided a valuable source of community and encouragement. I apologize to all who I've left out.

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Introduction – Before the Boycotts: Rural Elites and Partisanship before the Constitutionalist Party of Cochinchina.

This dissertation began as a study into twentieth century Vietnamese anti-Chinese political discourse. Initially planning to research shifting Vietnamese positioning toward China and the ethnic-Chinese over the course of the colonial and wartime periods, I encountered puzzling historiographical anomalies which characterized the earliest expressions of anti-Chinese sentiment. In a word, Vietnamese Sinophobia was first articulated as part of much a broader turn of the century nationalist political movement whose content and constituencies transcended the readily available historiographical categories.

The movement blurred French modernist and Confucian traditionalist attitudes, at a time when these were supposed to represent distinct worldviews pertaining to unique groups. It was both monarchist and colonial collaborationist – supposedly contradictory positions. The movement had a strong rural character, yet it was pro-business and despised superstition at a time when rural movements were supposed to be millenarian, Buddhist and based in peasant rebellion. It sharply criticized French, the Chinese, and other Vietnamese, at a time when the native elite is supposed to have been cowed and quietist. It was firmly grounded in South Vietnamese regional particularities and historical memory, at a time when nationalist ideas were supposed to be imported by exilic literati translating Chinese reformists. Also related to its local character, the movement was public and populist: it coincided with and depended upon the development of Vietnamese language print capitalism and arose from ethnic conflict between “natives” and immigrant mercantile minorities. This is a characteristic which it shared with contemporaneous native movements in neighboring Southeast Asian colonies, yet this comparison is largely absent from a historiography concerned with Vietnamese nationalist exiles in China and Japan and clandestine domestic “secret societies”. Lastly, the movement showed ideological and organizational ties to both the precolonial elite and the later Constitutionalist Party, whereas these are supposed to represent epochally distinct political forms and groups of people.

This dissertation seeks to resolve these and other anomalies by proposing that modern Vietnamese anti-Chinese political discourse was articulated as part of the program of an emergent, turn of the century, elite political bloc which united colonial clerks and bureaucrats around Saigon with old elite clans from a region of the Mekong Delta I’ve called the “Orchard Heartlands”. Not only did this elite bloc first articulate Vietnamese Sinophobic discourse, but it also pioneered Vietnamese publishing and established the institutional matrix for the later appearance of the Constitutionalist Party—tying that party in surprising ways both to the precolonial elite of the Mekong Delta and to the 1908 Reform Movement of Gilbert Chiếu. These connections cast the interwar vicissitudes of Vietnamese moderates in a new light, and it becomes evident that the Constitutionlists alienated key constituencies in the Orchard Heartlands, contributing to the political fracture and extremism that characterized the 1920s.

This evidence of Cochinchinese elite continuity across the colonial era has gone largely unnoticed. This is odd, because the South Vietnamese elite has received substantial scholarly

interest as one of the more politically charged questions of Vietnam War scholarship. However, instead of clarifying the history of the regional elite, the crude characterizations produced in those tense political contexts have cast a long shadow over subsequent historiography, and the composite portrait of the Cochinchinese elite which emerged wasn't subjected to sustained empirical scrutiny. For wartime scholars, the southern elite appeared as a novel product of colonial modernity: a class of absentee landlords and bureaucratic compradors, fundamentally out of touch with Vietnamese tradition, whose conservative and collaborationist politics were profoundly anti-national. Their economic base was depicted as exploitative and grounded in non-productive rent-seeking, and their political program hopelessly dependent on French favor.¹

Aspects of these mixed depictions may be true for specific times, places, or groupings, but no rigorous analysis has yet been undertaken on the origin, evolution, or factional differentiation of the Cochinchinese elite which could substantiate such a dismal portrait. This is particularly true of a historiographical gap that sits between the better-studied nineteenth century implantation of the colonial regime and the raucous interwar development of formal political parties in the francophone press. For the first generation of post-colonial historians, many of whom had been directly involved in the anti-war movement, communist hegemony was a foregone conclusion. They thus trained their focus on potential ancestors to the communist movement. In light of their later disrepute, the colonial elite was beneath consideration as a force exerting real leadership. Scholars characterized them as a small stratum of inconsequential urban intellectuals, a portrait which ultimately rested on a thin and impressionistic empirical foundation based on insights gleaned from earlier or later periods.

This dissertation remedies that important historiographical gap in Cochinchinese social and political history by studying the distinct elite grouping who came together around the newspapers *Talking Business over Tea* and *Six Provinces News* in the first decade of the twentieth century.² These publications were more than mere general interest dailies. Rather, they

¹ Vietnam War literature which devotes attention to the South Vietnamese elite is too vast to list comprehensively here. A few notable accounts give a sense of these depictions. Gabriel Kolko's history of the war begins by positing Communist hegemony, which he explains in terms of a rural economic crisis and the "underdevelopment of ideas and opposition"—i.e. an undisciplined intelligentsia and an usurious elite that was "enthralled by French consumer goods and material values, which they transmuted into a deepening identification with Gallic culture" Gabriel Kolko, *Anatomy of a War: Vietnam, the United States, and the Modern Historical Experience* (New Press, 1994), 21. Frances Fitzgerald argues that the French conquest "brushed away the thin web that bound the villages to Hue and to the empire, centralized the administration, and shaped it along Western bureaucratic lines. After ninety years of French rule, Vietnamese society in the south took on an entirely different construction from that in the north and center: the majority of the population was landless, dependent for wages or tenant's rights on the French and their Vietnamese proteges. The old elite had vanished, giving place to a small but very wealthy class of Vietnamese landlords and civil servants." Frances Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam* (Macmillan, 1972), 55. A more thoughtful sustained treatment of the worldview and positioning of the Vietnamese elite is in Paul Mus, who argued French education had produced a "generation of transition" caught between two worlds and structurally disposed toward political explosion rather than constructive accommodation. However, regarding what he called the *grande bourgeoisie cochinchinoise* specifically, Mus summarized them in terms of their inflexible defense of a property regime built on colonial land concentration and an obstacle to his desired restoration of constitutional monarchy. Paul Mus, *Việt-Nam: sociologie d'une guerre* (Éditions du Seuil, 1952).

² *Six Provinces News* is *Lục Tỉnh Tân Văn*. *Talking Business Over Tea* is the way I've translated *Nông cổ mín đàm: Causeries sur l'agriculture et le commerce*, which was first published in Saigon on August 1st, 1901. The title has been translated under various terms, some more accurate than others. Osborne mistranslated it as *Tribune of Old Agricultural People*, which was later followed by Marr and others. This misunderstands the *nông cổ* to be 農古 "old agriculture" whereas the Chinese characters on the masthead clearly show 農-nông for agriculture, and 賈-cổ for

anchored a contentious political movement and a renaissance in nationalist art and thought. The remainder of this chapter introduces the broader dissertation and is divided into three sections. First, I will examine the more substantial historical scholarship on the Cochinchinese elite, organized around four themes on which this dissertation intervenes: the periodization of the elite's emergence, its economic basis, the dynamics between urban and rural spheres, and its political agenda. Second, I will explain my theorization of the elite, situating my dissertation in recent trends in political sociology which have made its novel problematization possible. In addition to new conceptual tools, this dissertation has also benefited from newly available or identified source material. The third section will therefore introduce some of the source material used, and explain the methods applied to it, before closing with chapter summary.

Historiography of Early Twentieth Century Elite Partisanship

Periodization: A New or an Old Elite?

A foundational assumption running through the historiography is that the French conquest of Cochinchina produced a decisive break with the precolonial elite. This assumption derives, in part, from studies of the Nguyễn Dynasty which equated the elite with the civil bureaucracy — men whose status derived from examination success and administrative office.³ Debate centered on determining to what degree the examination system provided social mobility to talented commoners, or whether the administration was ultimately determined by meritocratic examinations rather than clan ties.⁴ Whether historians emphasized the relative openness of this

commerce, a meaning clearly repeated in the French subtitle. The second two characters, 茗談 are here phonetically rendered in Hán Việt as *mín đàm*, “tea talk”. Pycam more closely approaches the original by translating the title in truncated form as “Matters of Agriculture”. However, in Vietnamese it is common to refer to a whole domain by means of a pair that represents its scope. Taking *nông cổ* here to refer to the whole range of economic activities which fall outside of proper affairs of state, I translate it as “business”. Taken together, the English phrase “talking business over tea” captures the meaning of the title. For previous translations of the title see: Milton Osborne, *The French Presence in Cochinchina and Cambodia: Rule and Response (1859-1905)* (Cornell University Press, 1969), 168; David G. Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism 1885-1925* (University of California Press, 1980), 144; Philippe M. F. Pycam, *The Birth of Vietnamese Political Journalism: Saigon, 1916-1930* (Columbia University Press, 2012), 102.

³ For a general history of French enlightenment views of the mandarin, see David Harvey, *The French Enlightenment and Its Others: The Mandarin, the Savage, and the Invention of the Human Sciences* (Springer, 2012). For Vietnamese colonial historians see: Nguyen Van Phong, *La société vietnamienne de 1882 à 1902, d'après les écrits des auteurs français.*, [1. éd.], Publications de la Faculté des lettres et sciences humaines de Paris-Sorbonne. Série Recherches, t. 69 (Presses universitaires de France, 1971). ; For a brief historiography of anglophone repetition of these tropes see Nola Cooke, “The Composition of the Nineteenth-Century Political Elite of Pre-Colonial Nguyen Vietnam (1802–1883),” *Modern Asian Studies* 29, no. 4 (1995): 741–64, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X00016164>. The arguments extolling the traditional mandarin do have merit, with some arguing they exhibited distinctively modern features, see: Alexander Woodside, *Lost Modernities: China, Vietnam, Korea, and the Hazards of World History* (Harvard University Press, 2006).

⁴ The model is essentially that of Max Weber, who believed that “for twelve centuries social rank ... has been determined more by qualification for office than by wealth”. Max Weber, *Religion of China* (Free Press, 1951), 107. Truong Buu Lam argues that the precolonial elite never developed into a “closed social class” and that the “ruling class” was constituted from diverse social strata in such a way that ensured village life was for the most part “not exploitative”. Truong Buu Lam and Maivân Lâm, *New Lamps for Old: The Transformation of the Vietnamese Administrative Elite* (Maruzen Asia, 1982), 8. Alexander Woodside challenges this rosy depiction, arguing that the “profound differential acculturation” which “symbolized and governed the gulf between the elite and the ruled in Vietnam” meant that elites were concentrated among “great scholar families” in the Red River Delta who had ready access to educational resources and examination sites. Alexander Woodside, *Vietnam and the Chinese Model: A*

system or its closure to outsiders, administrative careers defined the category. The differences with Sinology are telling. In that field, local social historical studies spawned a “gentry turn” which identified overlapping and regionally distinct modalities of power accumulation and transmission.⁵ Despite some promising signs, no such local social turn has occurred in Vietnamese studies.⁶

The implication for the colonial era was straightforward: dismantling the mandarin administration meant dismantling the elite. This assumption shaped the work of the most important anglophone historians of Cochinchina. Milton Osborne, for example, framed the character of Cochinchinese colonial rule as determined by the “flight of the mandarins” and the consequent collapse of examination-based traditional administration.⁷ Nineteenth century colonial state construction relied on the cultivation of a new elite who had “no firm links with the old order” — initially Catholic partisans, then a broader stratum of colonial functionaries. For Osborne, the modernist intellectuals of the 1920s, men like Phạm Quỳnh and Constitutionalist founder Bùi Quang Chiêu, stood “in a direct line of descent from the early *collaborateurs*,” not from any precolonial gentry. The fact that Bùi Quang Chiêu traced his ancestry directly to the precolonial mandarin state mattered little to the framework.⁸ The colonial conquest was a year zero for the Cochinchinese indigenous elite.

Ralph Bernard Smith's influential periodization reinforced this picture. In an influential 1972 essay identifying four distinct periods of “Opposition to French Rule in Southern Vietnam” between 1880 and 1940, Smith framed each stage as an interplay between economically driven

Comparative Study of Vietnamese and Chinese Government in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century (BRILL, 2020), 199. In the late 1990s, Nola Cook challenged this scholarly focus on the examination system, showing that the highest administrative posts were statistically closed off to Northerners, and that widespread imperial manipulation ensured the primacy of an aristocratic network. Cooke, “The Composition of the Nineteenth-Century Political Elite of Pre-Colonial Nguyen Vietnam (1802–1883)”;

Nola Cooke, “Southern Regionalism and the Composition of the Nguyen Ruling Elite (1802–83),” *Asian Studies Review* 23, no. 2 (1999): 205–31, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357829908713232>.

⁵ Weber cited in Joseph W. Esherick and Mary Backus Rankin, *Chinese Local Elites and Patterns of Dominance* (SMC Publishing, 1990), 1. -- Two strands of scholarship converged in the 1960s which characterized this so called “gentry turn” in Sinology. First, a widespread engagement with Japanese scholarship and sources, with its relatively more sophisticated social history, spurred interest in economic elites. Second, anthropological research grounded in regional particularities eschewed high politics for local social variations. The new sources and methods spawned a generation of studies focused on localized power dynamics which have enriched Sinological understanding of Chinese historical political process and identified avenues to political notoriety outside the examination system. See in particular, the spatial perspective developed by G. William Skinner, “Marketing and Social Structure in Rural China: Part I,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 24, no. 1 (1964): 3–43, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2050412>; and Maurice Freedman, *Lineage Organization in Southeastern China* (University of London, Athlone Press, 1958). See also the collection of essays in Esherick and Rankin, *Chinese Local Elites and Patterns of Dominance*; These local elite focused studies formed the foundation for later synthetic accounts of a sort which Vietnamese studies is sorely lacking. For example: Prasenjit Duara, *Culture, Power, and the State: Rural North China, 1900–1942* (Stanford University Press, 1988).

⁶ A promising initial foray which in part inspires this dissertation is Emmanuel Poisson, *Mandarins et subalternes au nord du Viêt Nam: une bureaucratie à l'épreuve, 1820–1918*, Collection L'Asie en perspective (Maison neuve et Larose, 2004).

⁷ Osborne, *The French Presence in Cochinchina and Cambodia: Rule and Response (1859–1905)*, 143, 275–79.

⁸ In the words of a 1915 biographical encyclopedia which is an important resource of this dissertation, he “Originated from a noble lineage of scholars and officials, their ancestors served as mandarins under the old regime.” [*gốc dòng khoa hoạn trâm anh, lớp tiên nhơn có làm quan cựu trào...*] See entry 100. Bùi Quang Chiêu in: Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Điếu Cổ Hạ Kim Thi Tập* (Nhà xuất bản Văn hoá - Văn nghệ, 2013).

rural protests — which had a mass character but took traditional forms — and urban ideological movements modern in content but disconnected from the masses.⁹ Crucially, he established the Constitutionalist Party as a "turning-point in the development of Vietnamese nationalism" that was nonetheless disconnected, both culturally and organizationally, from the pre-WWI rural elite. Previously, politics had been the product of a "network of secret societies," destroyed in 1916. Moreover, the impetus and intellectual leadership for the preceding 1905–1908 period wasn't derived locally but rather relied on the Russo-Japanese War and the exilic nationalism of Phan Bội Châu.

Hue Tam Ho Tai largely inherited this periodization. Although she doesn't credit him directly, her first book, *Millenarianism*, employs Smith's framing of a disjuncture between a modernist French-educated urban elite and a rural peasantry steeped in traditional ideas and organizational structures.¹⁰ Her second monograph, *Radicalism*, partially deviates from the trend by emphasizing that the younger generation's radicalism was in part a reaction against the ostentatious, yet impotent, Confucian trappings of their fathers.¹¹ This is noteworthy because, by acknowledging the traditional moral universe of the elite, Hue Tam Ho Tai implicitly challenged a widely-held view promoted by figures like her dissertation advisor Alexander Woodside, which portrayed the Cochinchinese elite as "prostitutes to French soldiers and administrators" and "kitchen boy mandarins."¹² And yet, she also reinforces the sense of a break. Tai's depiction was restricted to a brief, largely anecdotal introductory chapter which inexplicably shifts to narrativizing exilic literati for the crucial early 20th century period. Her story returns to Cochinchina for the emergence of a new generation who broke decisively from the colonial accommodation of their parents and turned toward the messianic alternatives of millenarian tinged radicalism, largely conforming to Ralph Smith's periodization.¹³

⁹ The first, which peaked in 1882-1885, was characterized by localized versions of traditional mass violence, coordinated either through Nguyen affiliates, Cambodian rebels, Chinese "secret societies", or religious movements. The second period, peaking in 1905-1908, "saw the beginning of a new kind of nationalism in which the objective was some measure of modernization as well as independence." For Smith, the most important factor in this stage of "opposition to French rule" was the Russo Japanese War, the "new Chinese nationalism of men like Liang Chi'i-Ch'ao and Sun Yat-Sen," mediated through Phan Bội Châu's propagation of their ideas by way of Gilbert Chieu. Thus, the exilic nationalist narrative which dominated the historiography plays a crucial role in sidelining the local politics of the regional elite. The third period, which peaked from 1912-1916, was characterized by widespread rural unrest and shows the growing power of millenarian religious societies in the countryside. The fourth period, from 1925-1931, is marked by the maturation of the generation of "younger, more impatient" returnees from France who, along with the Chinese KMT, introduce modern mass party organizations. R. B. Smith, "The Development of Opposition to French Rule in Southern Vietnam 1880-1940," *Past & Present*, no. 54 (1972): 94–129.

¹⁰ Smith's periodization of the "Opposition to French Rule" appears in *Millenarianism* for its account of both the Phan Xích Long related rebellions from 1913-1916, and the uprisings of 1930. The dialectic of rural-economic and urban-political, as in Smith, provides the narrative structure. The sixth chapter of *Millenarianism*, titled "Transitions: Sects and Mass Movements," characterizes the year as the turning point where urban mass politics began to bring a "vision of society and politics" to the organizational capacity of the millenarian sects. Hue-Tam Ho Tai, *Millenarianism and Peasant Politics in Vietnam* (Harvard University Press, 1983), 99.

¹¹ Hue-Tam Ho Tai, *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution* (Harvard University Press, 1992).

¹² Alexander Woodside, *Community and Revolution in Modern Vietnam* (Houghton Mifflin, 1976), 10–11.

¹³ For Tai, these were a new generation of "anarchists,"—analogous to Smith's "younger, more impatient" generation— who rejected both traditional corporatist values and the corrupt colonial bargain which sustained them, embracing instead a republican vision for the liberation of the individual from the shackles of the past. By the time of the Great Depression, this raucous youth movement yielded to the more messianic strains of Marxism and Caodaism, which both addressed "a need for reassurance" produced by the "crisis of Vietnamese culture" arising

A rival but equally discontinuous periodization is offered by Pierre Brocheux. Where Osborne and Smith anchor their chronology in political events — the conquest, the destruction of secret societies, the founding of the Constitutionals — Brocheux's periodization is economic, driven by the drainage and settlement of the western Mekong Delta marshes, the rise and fall of rice prices, and the Great Depression.¹⁴ Thus, Brocheux's economic elite is likewise a "new class," though one produced by colonial economic transformation rather than administrative construction.

More recent scholarship has not fundamentally challenged this periodization. For example, Philippe Peycam's monograph, *The Birth of Vietnamese Political Journalism* conforms to Smith's periodization by beginning its substantive analysis in 1916. Peycam deserves immense credit for being one of few studies to investigate early twentieth century print culture, but he treats the pre-WWI period as preamble. In the process, he makes some basic errors of fact regarding this dissertation's centerpiece, the newspaper *Talking Business over Tea*.¹⁵

Other important recent studies likewise acknowledge but ultimately give short shrift to important turn of the century elite predecessors to their research subjects. For instance, Micheline Lessard's important study of the 1919 anti-Chinese boycott and Christopher Goscha's account of the broader "Sino-Cochinchinese debate" both show that interwar anti-Chinese movements built upon predecessors from a decade prior, but neither explores how those earlier movements related to the social formations that carried the later ones forward.¹⁶ These developments are welcome, but they need to be extended. Despite acknowledging that an anti-Chinese political movement existed in turn of the century Cochinchina, the authors don't allow the anomaly to disrupt their periodization, which emphasizes an interwar political awakening of the Cochinchinese elite. This dissertation will show that the political awakening in fact took place two decades earlier than is often acknowledged, and it was articulated at a new formation of an old elite bloc in 1901.

Class character: Bureaucrats or Landlords?

The historiography offers two primary characterizations of the elite's social base, neither of which are adequate. The first, most visible in Osborne and Smith, roots the elite in administrative service. For Osborne, prominent collaborators owed their position to the French state. He explicitly distinguished his early elite from those who later "rose to financial prominence," but exploring potential developments after the later turn of the century fell outside the scope of his monograph, which was focused on the nineteenth century.¹⁷ Smith's influential study of the 1943

from a social Darwinist threat of "looming national annihilation". Tai, *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution*, 262.

¹⁴ Pierre Brocheux, "Grands Propriétaires et Fermiers Dans l'ouest de La Cochinchine Pendant La Période Coloniale," *Revue Historique* 246, no. 1 (499) (1971): 59–76; Pierre Brocheux, *The Mekong Delta: Ecology, Economy, and Revolution, 1860-1960* (Center for Southeast Asian Studies, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1995).

¹⁵ A common mistake across historians, he misidentifies Gilbert Trần Chánh Chiêu as its first chief editor when in fact Lương Khắc Ninh and Nguyễn Chánh Sắt were the pioneers. Philippe M. F. Peycam, *The Birth of Vietnamese Political Journalism: Saigon, 1916-1930* (Columbia University Press, 2012), 102. As discussed in Chapter 8 of this dissertation, these and other basic errors appear in English and Vietnamese language scholarship alike.

¹⁶ Micheline R. Lessard, "Organisons-Nous! Racial Antagonism and Vietnamese Economic Nationalism in the Early Twentieth Century," *French Colonial History* 8, no. 1 (2007): 171–201; Christopher E. Goscha, "Widening the Colonial Encounter: Asian Connections Inside French Indochina During the Interwar Period," *Modern Asian Studies* 43, no. 5 (2009): 1189–228, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X0800351X>.

¹⁷ Osborne, *The French Presence in Cochinchina and Cambodia: Rule and Response (1859-1905)*, 143.

elite leapfrogged the intervening decades, characterizing that era's elite as the "growth and development" of Osborne's collaborator class, which was born of the conquest seventy years prior.¹⁸ He similarly defined the elite in terms of "education (especially French); administrative or professional functions" and "economic rewards" — "people who owed their success very largely to French approval." The modal type was educated at *Chasseloup-Laubat* or *Taberd*, enlisted in the colonial bureaucracy, and held membership in local *amicales*.

The second characterization, associated with Brocheux, is socioeconomic. He emphasized a colonial development policy that sought to increase export rice yields by draining and settling new land. A usurious agricultural credit system, which was held aloft before the Great Depression by continuously rising rice prices, concentrated land in the hands of absentee landlords and pitted them against a "floating population" of agricultural laborers and sharecroppers. Brocheux characterized the resulting latifundios as "a bourgeoisie whose wealth was grounded in land ownership," linked "laterally to bureaucrats and members of the liberal professions" through their offspring.¹⁹ This characterization — the southern elite as an exploitative landed bourgeoisie — gained wide historiographical currency and became the default portrait in subsequent scholarship.

Hue Tam Ho Tai in turn drew on Brocheux for the economic dimensions of her analysis, invoking his class framework to explain both the 1916 millenarian rebellions and the upheavals of 1930. Lessard borrowed from Hue Tam Ho Tai for her characterization of an "emerging middle-class" which was comprised of "large landowners, businessmen, colonial civil servants, teachers, and other professionals, closely tied through a number of associations".²⁰ Neither scholar undertook independent analysis to show how such disparate groups could cohere politically. Goscha similarly references "the development of an ethnic Vietnamese bourgeoisie and commercial agriculture" without specifying the social or regional composition of this bourgeoisie or its relationship to the precolonial economy.²¹

¹⁸ Interestingly, hints of elite continuity are visible beneath the confidence of his assertions. For example he at one point recognized the limits of his own portrait by speculating that although "the imperial government and related institutions were no longer important in the South", the "traditional clan [...] may have even been strengthened" and that "it could well be argued that the real élite of Cochinchina consisted not of individuals so much as of a number of prominent families, within which these people were merely the most prominent individuals." Essentially presaging the findings of this dissertation.

R. B. Smith, "The Vietnamese Élite of French Cochinchina, 1943," *Modern Asian Studies* 6, no. 4 (1972): 459–82.

¹⁹ For Brocheux, such estates did not exist in independent Vietnam, but rather only appeared with the French conquest. A "pyramid of dependencies" was erected, following the flow of agricultural credit down from the Bank of Indochina and the Chinese rice merchants. By the time credit reached the tenant farmers, interest rates had become impossibly ruinous, in effect granting the landlord— or as was often the case, his estate managers— complete discretion over harvest. The continuous rise in rice prices before the Great Depression temporarily kept the system afloat. But ultimately, "the growth of export-rice monoculture during the French colonial period bred the 'question sociale' in the Mekong Delta," by stimulating a process of wealth concentration which launched the region into cycles of class violence after the Great Depression. See: Brocheux, *The Mekong Delta*, 76–80, 109, 136–41, 210; Brocheux, "Grands Propriétaires et Fermiers Dans l'ouest de La Cochinchine Pendant La Période Coloniale," 60.

²⁰ Hue-Tam Ho Tai, "The Politics of Compromise: The Constitutionalist Party and the Electoral Reforms of 1922 in French Cochinchina," *Modern Asian Studies* 18, no. 3 (1984): 371–91, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X00009021>; Lessard, "Organisons-Nous! Racial Antagonism and Vietnamese Economic Nationalism in the Early Twentieth Century."

²¹ Goscha, "Widening the Colonial Encounter."

Each of these characterizations has merit, but they are partial and empirically thin. The administration-focused characterization typified by Osborne and Smith are based in studies profiling the vastly different periods: the late nineteenth century consolidation of the colonial state and the 1943 twilight of the colonial era. Even if we put aside the validity of speculatively connecting the dots between such disparate times, they are simply too empirically weak as studies of the elite —Osborne follows the career of a few high-profile functionaries, while Smith's tabulates Cochinchinese individuals appearing in a single French *who's who* covering all three *pays* of Indochina. Thus, although they provide many thought-provoking insights, they rest on too narrow a foundation to support expansive claims about the regional elite. The same could be said of the economic analyses deployed by Brocheux and inherited to varying extents by later scholars. The drainage of swampland and development of large landholdings in the far western provinces of the Delta, with its consequent system of agricultural credit, sharecropping and export-oriented rice production, is an outstanding feature of the Southern political economy with inarguable implications for any analysis of the Cochinchinese Vietnamese elite. However, the interwar maturation of this system is often projected back onto the turn of the century as the inevitable telos of social development, ironing over the era's contentious politics and turning a blind eye to its contingencies.

These shortcomings are not attributable to any deficiency in the individual scholars but rather reflect the severe underdevelopment of local social history in Vietnamese historiography. Just as in sinology, the historiography of other Southeast Asian countries turned decisively toward local and provincial history beginning in the 1970s. Leading studies generated rich accounts of regionally specific elite formations. Pioneered by Harry Benda and taken up by Cornell school scholars who were "dissatisfied with the impressionistic generalizations which existing studies offered the student of social change," these studies specified how global frameworks — modernization, bureaucratization, world systems — interacted with particular "small worlds" planted firmly in geographically and economically defined areas.²² Java and the Philippines were studied with particular intensity, but the turn touched every country in the region.²³ Vietnam, however, has seen nothing comparable. Outside of a handful of isolated contributions -- notably Trinh Van Thao's stimulating but methodologically flawed 1990 prosopography of the national

²² Ruth Thomas McVey and Adrienne Suddard, *Southeast Asian Transitions: Approaches Through Social History* (Yale University Press, 1978), 8; Harry J. Benda and Lance Castles, "The Samin Movement," *Bijdragen Tot de Taal-, Land- En Volkenkunde* 125, no. 2 (1969): 207–40.

²³ The studies are too many and too varied for a comprehensive list. However, listing a few of the most notable give a sense of the turn's breadth. In addition to McVey's already mentioned anthology, there is the groundbreaking Philippine anthology by Alfred W. McCoy and Ed C. De Jesus, *Philippine Social History: Global Trade and Local Transformations* (Ateneo University Press, 1982). Some landmark texts in the field already anticipated the turn. For example, C. Geertz, *Peddlers and Princes: Social Change and Economic Modernization in Two Indonesian Towns* (1963). Even Benedict Anderson's dissertation could plausibly fit into the category, Benedict Anderson, *Java in a Time of Revolution: Occupation and Resistance, 1944-1946* (Equinox Publishing, 2006). Larkin's dissertation on Pampangan was likewise an early pioneer of a tightly focused regional study, John A. Larkin, *The Evolution of Pampangan Society: A Case Study of Social and Economic Change in the Rural Philippines* (New York University, 1966)., Important works have also focused on specific families or networks. For example Jennifer Wayne Cushman, *Family and State: The Formation of a Sino-Thai Tin-Mining Dynasty, 1797-1932* (Oxford University Press, 1991); Alfred W. McCoy, *An Anarchy of Families: State and Family in the Philippines* (Univ of Wisconsin Press, 2009). To these can be added the countless studies that focus on regionally or sector bound ethnic minority elites, see for example James Robert Rush, *Opium to Java: Revenue Farming and Chinese Enterprise in Colonial Indonesia, 1860-1910* (Equinox Publishing, 2007); Ruth Thomas McVey, *Southeast Asian Capitalists* (SEAP Publications, 1992). Vietnam studies simply has nothing like this.

intelligentsia, and his 2009 study of the fish sauce company Liên Thành -- insights into regional elites, social structures, and the institutions linking them appear only incidentally, as byproducts of more broadly focused historical monographs.²⁴ This dissertation is conceived as step toward remedying that deficiency.

Rural-Urban Dynamics: A False Dichotomy?

A third related distortion in the existing historiography is the assumption of an insurmountable gap between urban and rural spheres. This assumption takes different forms across the scholarship, but it consistently obscures the rural elite political bloc at the center of this dissertation.

Osborne's focus on Saigon-based collaborators is the most straightforward version. While his study suggests that prominent collaborators were embedded in wider social networks, and we learn of intermarriage and social clubs, no detail is provided on the institutions that tied these men to rural constituencies, nor of any factions among collaborating groups. Furthermore, although some of the most important collaborators hailed from the middle and eastern delta provinces that I've termed the "Orchard Heartland," no attempt is made to identify distinct constituencies or regional explanations.²⁵ Instead, the collaborator elite moves to Saigon after the conquest and becomes urban. As discussed above, Smith made the dichotomy structurally central to his periodization, framing the entire arc of Cochinchinese politics as a rural urban dialectic.²⁶ Hue Tam Ho Tai adopted this framework: *Millenarianism* charted the rural-traditional track and *Radicalism* the urban-intellectual one until its dialectical resolution in the revolutionary socialist movement.

The dichotomy persists even in economic accounts focused on rural space. Brocheux, for example, places the provinces rather than Saigon at the center of his analysis. Yet his characterization of the elite as absentee landlords who are based in the cities and exploit rural tenants through intermediaries ultimately reinforces the same dichotomy. Furthermore, Brocheux identifies several important rural civic organizations, such the founding of SICAMs-*Sociétés Indigènes de Crédit Agricole Mutuel*, and the related *Sociétés d'Enseignement Mutuels*.²⁷ However, in its brevity, his treatment leaves unspecified the way these institutions functioned to unite urban and rural elites.

²⁴ Trinh Van Thao, *Vietnam du confucianisme au communisme: un essai itinéraire intellectuel*, Collection "Recherches asiatiques" (L'Harmattan, 1990); Van Thao Trinh, "Liên Thành (1906-1975) naissance et transfiguration d'une entreprise moderniste. Essai de sociologie historique," in *Vietnam : Le moment moderniste*, ed. Gilles De Gantès and Phuong Ngoc Nguyen, Le temps de l'histoire (Presses universitaires de Provence, 2009), <https://doi.org/10.4000/books.pup.6657>. There are promising developments that deserve mention and have inspired my own approach. Poisson, *Mandarins et subalternes au nord du Viêt Nam*; Marie Aberdam, "Élites Cambodgiennes En Situation Coloniale, Essai d'histoire Sociale Des Réseaux de Pouvoir Dans l'administration Cambodgienne Sous Le Protectorat Français (1860-1953)." (Thèse pour l'obtention du titre de docteur en histoire, Université Paris 1 Panthéon Sorbonne École doctorale d'histoire, 2019).; Though not studies of a particular elite per se, two monographs on Cochinchinese religious movements stand out for their attention to local social conditions and should be counted as part of any hoped for local social turn in Vietnam. Jérémy Jammes, *Les oracles du Cao Đài: étude d'un mouvement religieux vietnamien et ses réseaux* (Les Indes savantes, 2014); Pascal Bourdeaux, *Bouddhisme Hòa Hảo, d'un monde à l'autre: religion et révolution au sud Viêt Nam (1935-1955)*, Collection Vietnamica (Les Indes savantes, 2022).

²⁵ For example, Trương Vĩnh Ký and Trần Bá Lộc were from the Bến Tre and Tiền Giang areas respectively.

²⁶ Smith, "The Development of Opposition to French Rule in Southern Vietnam 1880-1940."

²⁷ Brocheux, *The Mekong Delta*, 76.

This dissertation will pick up on these threads, to argue these civic organizations and their predecessors in the 1908 Reform movement became the vital organizational matrix for the rural elite and culminated in the Constitutionalist Party. By tabulating and mapping the information in seldom used verse gazetteers and close reading of the era's Vietnamese language periodicals, I will demonstrate the hitherto unrecognized importance of the elite clans of the Orchard Heartland region, who dominated Cochinchinese politics before the Great War.

Political Agenda: Collaboration, Nationalism or Elite Rivalry?

The final theme concerns how the elite's political project has been characterized. The dominant accounts converge on a portrait of conservative, collaborationist politics: an elite that sought accommodation with the French and whose nationalism, to the extent it existed, was belated, derivative, and ultimately futile.

For Osborne, the politics of the collaborator elite were defined by allegiance to French civilizational values. He depicted them as a “Herodian group” who hoped that “the France of Montesquieu and Rousseau would heed their [that is, the Vietnamese elite's] calls for reforms”. He only partially blames the thirst for “personal aggrandizement” displayed by these “land-wealthy men of Cochinchina,” turning attention instead to the “more subtle explanation” of their belief in “the best of France” and their hopes in the metropole as “a source of knowledge and advancement for Viet-Nam.”²⁸ Thus it was imported foreign ideals, rather than local conditions, which defined the elites' political aspirations.

Smith likewise divorced the interwar elites' political emergence from any organic regional interests. Instead of grounding the development of the Constitutionlists to local political energy, he attributes the formation of the party to a lull in nationalist activity coinciding with the progressive “associationist” General Governorship of Albert Sarraut. These were an entirely new cohort who “although Vietnamese by birth and mother-tongue, were French by education and in some cases nationality.” Smith speculates that, in the immediate years after the First World War, the party had “only a small group of intimates as members”, and that it was separated from more ethnically appropriate exilic nationalists like Phan Chau Trinh by a “wide educational gulf.”²⁹

This is doubtless true in many respects. As an agronomist, Bui Quang Chiêu exemplified the first generation of colonial technocrats. He had trained in France, worked extensively in the other *pays* of the colony, and played an increasingly important role in Cochinchinese society into the interwar period and remained a major political figure up until his murder by the Viet Minh in 1945. Phan Châu Trinh, on the other hand, was a traditionally trained imperial mandarin who grappled with Chinese reformist texts to develop a distinct hybrid Sino-Vietnamese Republicanism. His most important legacy for Cochinchina was more symbolic than ideological, as his death in 1926 was the occasion for an unprecedented mass protest. Thus, the two statesmen superficially exemplify the epochal break supposed to govern two distinct modes of political engagement, i.e. colonial reformism and exilic agitation. But the Osborne-Smith division into disparate civilizational paradigms – Francophile vs traditional Sinitic – obscures the ramified and longstanding gentry networks and civic organizational matrix which made Bui

²⁸ Both the previous quotes are from Osborne, *The French Presence in Cochinchina and Cambodia: Rule and Response (1859-1905)*, 279.

²⁹ R. B. Smith, “Bui Quang Chiêu and the Constitutionalist Party in French Cochinchina, 1917-30,” *Modern Asian Studies* 3, no. 2 (1969): 147–49.

Quang Chiêu such a potent leader in the first place. Furthermore, unlike Phan Châu Trinh who primarily acted as a public intellectual and writer, Bùi Quang Chiêu was the leader of a political party, who strategized around contesting elections and whose political activity was therefore at least as much determined by concrete problems of intra elite rivalry as any expansive civilizational affection for France.

Brocheux foregrounds rural and economically defined groups to provide a more nuanced account of local attitudes and institutions. He thereby contributes more than any other regional historian to our understanding of the conflicted cultural injunctions, material incentives, and political ideals of the rural elite, particularly for the sparsely addressed first two decades of the twentieth century.³⁰ Furthermore, Brocheux's short article on Gilbert Trần Chánh Chiếu – a figure who is central to the later chapters of this dissertation -- is one of the few to address the leader's business and anti-Chinese politics, instead of dwelling solely on his connections to exilic revolutionary Phan Bội Châu. But Brocheux likewise resorts to French emulation when he describes the period's politics as suffering from the "syndrome de Gilbert Chieu" in which Vietnamese sought to "be considered as full members of the bourgeoisie" and "treated as equals by the French."³¹ Thus even here the period's politics are decoded in terms of a civilizational struggle between collaboration and resistance.

While Brocheux avoids the full implications of political conflicts among the colonized during the early 20th Century, the more recent studies by Lessard and Goscha have begun to correct this picture by highlighting the anti-Chinese dimension of Cochinchinese politics.³² Lessard framed the 1919 anti-Chinese boycott movement in Saigon as driven by racial antagonism between Vietnamese and Chinese commercial interests. Yet even here, collaboration plays too prominent an explanatory role, as Lessard argues the boycott failed because the Vietnamese only represented a "small, westernized, emerging middle-class" who couldn't challenge French domination, which is therefore presumed to be the ultimate telos of political action. Goscha avoids this pitfall by situating the boycott within a longer "Sino-Cochinchinese debate" driven by "the development of an ethnic Vietnamese bourgeoisie and commercial agriculture," in which men with "the financial means, property and colonial connections" asserted themselves through anti-Chinese campaigns. However, politics is still understood as a conflict between ethno-racial groups (whether they be Vietnamese, Chinese, or French).

In sum, both scholars identified a nationalist program far more specific than the vague binary of collaboration vs resistance which dominates earlier historiography. This is a welcomed expansion of the parameters of early twentieth century Vietnamese politics beyond the colonial confrontation. This dissertation aims to carry this momentum into a more granular analysis of the turn of the century elite which would form the foundation for understanding the era's politics as interaction among competing Vietnamese elites, rather than as conflicts between the supposedly primordial social cleavages of class, sect, or race.

The chief obstacle is that early twentieth century Vietnamese political historiography lacks attention to the institutional process by which anti-Chinese sentiment was converted into

³⁰ His insights here are scattered in a somewhat encyclopedic fashion across chapters 4 and 5 of Brocheux, *The Mekong Delta*, 91.

³¹ Brocheux, *The Mekong Delta*, 141.

³² Lessard, "Organisations-Nous! Racial Antagonism and Vietnamese Economic Nationalism in the Early Twentieth Century"; Goscha, "Widening the Colonial Encounter."

organized political action. Compare, for example, Shiraishi's treatment of Indonesia's Sarekat Islam, which locates the party's social base in the batik traders of Surakarta and tracks its development through the early *pergerakan* movement and related interparty debates.³³ The anti-Chinese boycott of 1919, in other words, was not a spontaneous eruption of ethnic resentment but the culmination of nearly two decades of institution-building first visible in the pages of *Talking Business* — a story that the existing periodization, with its interwar starting point, is structurally unable to tell.

The Articulation Approach to Elite Political Formation

The preceding review has analyzed the historiography of the Cochinchinese elite to show its broad agreement across four dimensions. In its periodization, it assumes a radical break in the elite after the colonial conquest. This assumption is itself based in an outdated sinological framework positing a tight correspondence between the mandarin state and the local elite. In its social analysis, it based the elite in either the French colonial bureaucracy or the latifundios of the far western provinces — depictions which have merit for certain groups but are largely anecdotal and empirically thin. Geographically, it tends to emphasize rural urban discontinuity — asserting essentially distinct political trajectories between an urban Francophile reformist modernism and a rural traditionalism toward millenarian peasant revolt. The geographic dimension maps onto the fourth, political, dimension, which had until recently emphasized a simplistic distinction between resistance and collaboration. Recent work has complicated this picture by analyzing conflicts among colonized ethnic groups — chiefly between the Vietnamese, Chinese, and Khmers. However, the political sociological framework employed across all these studies posits conflicts as arising from primordial social cleavages such as race, class, and ethnicity. Such a model faces an insuperable logical dilemma: if these cleavages have long rested in the social body, then why do they only become politically salient at certain moments?

The difficulty in responding to this question relates to a conspicuous absence characterizing all four of the above historiographical themes: no scholar has yet attempted to trace the institutional genealogy connecting the turn-of-the-century civic organizations mediated through the *quốc ngữ* press to the formal political parties of the interwar era — a gap that leaves the Constitutionalist Party, and therefore the entire landscape of Cochinchinese party politics, without an origin story. To tell this story requires a political sociology that centers the creative autonomy of networked actors, instead of broad identity categories. What's needed is a framework for understanding how intermediary institutions — newspapers, civic organizations, credit cooperatives — constructed a political bloc from potentially conflicting constituencies. In a word, the existing historiography lacks a theory of the party.

Antonio Gramsci's "methodological criteria" for a history of subaltern classes provides the essential orientation.³⁴ Gramsci identified a developmental process by which subordinate groups move from conserving the mentality and aims of preexisting social formations, through affiliation with and reaction against dominant groups, to pressing claims of their own through formal organizations — culminating, at the furthest extreme, in the construction of a party

³³ Vietnamese historiography today faces a strikingly similar problem as the one faced by Shiraishi in 1990: instead of tracking political mobilization through intra- and interparty contestation, the orthodox account has essentially reproduced a classificatory system drawn from later colonial police taxonomies. See: Takashi Shiraishi, *An Age in Motion: Popular Radicalism in Java, 1912-1926* (Cornell University Press, 1990), xiii.

³⁴ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (International, 1971), 52–55.

capable of exercising political leadership. This vantage point makes clear the way existing scholarship has dropped us *in medias res*: we glimpse the interwar outburst of Constitutionalist party activity but remain in the dark regarding the institutional and economic terrain which lent this activity its political logic, and the preceding social formations from which the party's constituencies were drawn.

Recently, sociologists have refined Gramsci's fundamental insight into what has been termed the "articulation approach."³⁵ Where older scholarship tended to assume that political parties *expressed* preexisting social cleavages — transmitting some primordial class, ethnic, or regional identity already inherent in the social body — the articulation approach posits that parties *articulate*, and thereby fashion rather than reflect cleavages and identity categories.³⁶ As Gramsci observed, "the masses don't exist politically, if they are not framed in political parties."³⁷ De Leon, Desai, and Tugal define political articulation as the "structured creativity of parties" — "the process by which parties 'suture' together coherent blocs and cleavages from a disparate set of constituencies and individuals, who, even by virtue of sharing circumstances, may not necessarily share the same political identity."³⁸ Crucially, this process operates through both discursive means — ideology, rhetoric, print culture — and non-discursive tools such as patronage, favorable trade policy, credit arrangements, and violence. The articulation approach thus diverges from strict culturalist analyses by insisting that parties' scope of action is bound by institutional and material constraints, not only by symbolic creativity.³⁹

The framework is suited to this dissertation because its subject maps directly onto the approach's core analytical elements: a political group (the Orchard Heartland Gentry), a nascent party institution (*Talking Business* and its associated civic organizations), and a political agenda (anti-Chinese business nationalism). By focusing on the creative assembly of political blocs through intermediary institutions, the articulation approach provides a means to conceptualize *Talking Business* as a nascent party institution which sought to suture together a coalition from disorganized and potentially conflicting interest groups: colonial clerks, provincial landholders, traditional gentry, and commercial entrepreneurs. Rather than assuming these groups shared a natural political identity by virtue of their class position or ethnicity, this dissertation traces the contingent process by which they were articulated into a bloc — and the equally contingent process by which that bloc fractured.⁴⁰ The problem has obvious importance for early twentieth

³⁵ See Cedric De Leon et al., "Political Articulation: Parties and the Constitution of Cleavages in the United States, India, and Turkey," *Sociological Theory* 27, no. 3 (2009): 193–219, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9558.2009.01345.x>; Cedric de Leon et al., *Building Blocs: How Parties Organize Society* (Stanford University Press, 2015).

³⁶ Although the verbal distinction seems small, the conceptual distinction is important. 'Expression' implies the simple reflection of some underlying content or trait, for example "expressing a gene", or a "expressing an emotion". Whereas articulation, to quote Stuart Hall, connotes a "connection or link that can make a unity of two different elements under certain conditions," which have "no necessary belongingness" and wherein "each retains its distinct determinations and conditions of existence"; Stuart Hall, *Cultural Studies 1983: A Theoretical History* (Duke University Press, 2016), 121.

³⁷ "The Parties and the Masses, by Antonio Gramsci 1921," accessed February 5, 2026, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/gramsci/1921/09/parties-masses.htm>.

³⁸ Emphasis in original. Leon et al., *Building Blocs*, 2.

³⁹ Contrast for example Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony And Socialist Strategy: Towards A Radical Democratic Politics* (Verso Books, 2014).

⁴⁰ Barry Eidelin, for example, demonstrates that clear divergences in union density and party formations in the US and Canada cannot be deduced from preexisting cleavages or institutional arrangements, but rather are best

century Cochinchinese history, where the colonial era saw political, racial, religious and ethnic fragmentation which had lasting repercussions for the midcentury civil and anti-colonial wars.

This theoretical orientation distinguishes the present study from the approaches that have dominated the field. Unlike culturalist analyses preoccupied with the symbolic coding of social distinction, it keeps the material and institutional dimensions of political organization at the center.⁴¹ Unlike structuralist economic accounts, it does not treat class as a pre-political given from which political behavior can be straightforwardly deduced. And unlike state-centered approaches that frame parties as epiphenomenal to the autonomous logic of state institutions, it insists on the party — even in its incipient, pre-formal stages — as the primary site where social cleavages are developed and deployed.⁴² In short, the articulation approach clarifies that the Cochinchinese elite bloc was not a natural social formation waiting to be discovered, but a political achievement that had to be constructed.

Dissertation Summary

The preceding sections have laid out the theoretical and historiographical stakes. The dissertation responds by arguing that the Cochinchinese elite was not a novel colonial creation but the political reorganization of an old Mekong Delta gentry under new conditions. This bloc articulated its program through the *quốc ngữ* press beginning in 1901 and built a civic organizational matrix during Gilbert Chiếu's Enlightened Renewal movement of 1907–1909. The shock of Chiếu's spectacular arrest, and the emergency restrictions of the First World War, temporarily channeled the movement into less confrontation civic organizing initiatives. But

explained by the strategic negotiations undertaken as part of party coalition building. Barry Eidlin, “Why Is There No Labor Party in the United States? Political Articulation and the Canadian Comparison, 1932 to 1948,” *American Sociological Review* 81, no. 3 (2016): 488–516, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122416643758>.

⁴¹ For a few very different examples, see: Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (Penguin, 1994); Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Harvard Univ. Press, 1984); Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony And Socialist Strategy*.

⁴² Here I am thinking primarily of neo-Weberian historical sociologists' emphasis on the “autonomy” of the state, i.e. the state's ability “to pursue goals that are not simply reflective of the demands or interests of social groups, classes, or society”. This state centered approach for the most part framed political parties as only one among the plurality of relevant state-dependent institutions. In Theda Skocpol's words, “lines of determination run as much (or more) from state structures to party organizations to the content of electoral politics as they run from voter preferences to party platforms to state policies.” Peter B. Evans et al., eds., *Bringing the State Back In* (Cambridge University Press, 1985), 9, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511628283>.; However, the neo-Weberian focus on the state was preceded by far-reaching Marxist “state debates”. These fought over whether the state was a mere instrument of the capitalist class, and to what degree it had *relative autonomy*. The debate signaled a decisive shift within Marxist thought, to seeing the state as a strategic terrain for managing institutional contradictions. This debate's influence on this dissertation is indirect, and channeled through the French Regulation School, which foregrounds the state as a “vector of institutional compromises” between economic *regimes of accumulation* and political *modes of regulation*. See chapter 2 of this dissertation. Ralph Miliband, *State In Capitalist Society* (Basic Books, 1969); Nicos Ar Poulantzas, *Political Power and Social Classes* (Verso Editions, 1978); Fred Block, “The Ruling Class Does Not Rule: Notes on the Marxist Theory of the State,” *Socialist Revolution*, no. 33 (June 1977), <https://fredblock.org/wp-content/uploads/The-Ruling-Class-Does-Not-Rule-1977.pdf>; Göran Therborn, *What Does the Ruling Class Do When It Rules?: State Apparatuses and State Power Under Feudalism, Capitalism and Socialism* (NLB, 1978); Bob Jessop, “Dialogue of the Deaf: Some Reflections on the Poulantzas-Miliband Debate,” in *Class, Power and the State in Capitalist Society: Essays on Ralph Miliband*, ed. Paul Wetherly et al. (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2008), https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230592704_7.; Robert Boyer, *Political Economy of Capitalisms* (Springer Nature, 2022).

when the Constitutionalist Party exploded onto the francophone press from 1917, it inherited the program, personnel, and institutional infrastructure of this earlier generation.

My argument intervenes on each of the four historiographical themes identified above. On periodization, the retreat of the mandarins did not cause a radical break in the character of the regional elite. Although the lack of a preexisting administrative apparatus forced the French to rely on Catholic partisans during the earliest stages and for the highest indigenous offices, by the turn of the century widespread colonial accommodation had become the norm. The old elite continued to play a significant, if not dominant, role. Such accommodation was possible because the final liquidation of the last hawkish elements within the Nguyễn Court after the rebellions of 1885 ushered in a period of monarchical submission which I have termed the Franco-Nguyễn Détente. The period spanned the reigns of Đồng Khánh (1885–1889), Thành Thái (1889–1907), and Duy Tân (1907–1916). This was the age of *Talking Business* — when an old Mekong Delta elite, steeped in a surviving culture of Confucian gentility, joined forces with a new class of French-educated colonial administrators to pursue a program of national flourishing, as well as personal enrichment, by targeting Chinese immigrants under a fantasy of benevolent colonial tutelage.

On urban-rural dynamics, the quốc ngữ press — and *Talking Business* in particular — functioned as a point of rural urban coordination which linked Saigon-based intellectuals and political representatives with a provincial gentry whose power was rooted in the orchard economy of the eastern Mekong Delta. The institutional matrix of civic, recreational, and mutual aid organizations first visible in the pages of *Talking Business* — and later formalized in the hotels, cooperatives, and enterprises of the Enlightened Renewal movement — was the connective tissue between these spheres that the existing scholarship has failed to see. Attention to the strongly rural character of this early elite in turn sheds new light on the early Constitutionalist Party, showing them to be far less disconnected from the countryside as often claimed.

My most sustained intervention is on the social basis of the elite. The prosopographic and quantitative literary evidence assembled in this dissertation doesn't neatly fit into either the far Western latifundio nor the Saigonese bureaucrat models. Although prominent figures certainly embodied these types, and the types inarguably represent powerful elite constituencies, the framework nonetheless fails to account for early twentieth century dynamics in two ways.

First, the framework misses the Orchard Heartland gentry. These were men who hailed largely from important lineages embedded in the local rural administration, particularly village councilors and canton chiefs of the near Mekong provinces — Mỹ Tho, Bến Tre, Vĩnh Long, Gò Công, Trà Vinh — where an older cash crop agricultural economy once predominated. These offices were elected by colleges of village notables drawn from the elite clans of several villages and therefore depended less on achievement in the French colonial school, and more on the management of traditional rural oligarchies. As time went on, this class may very well have been overshadowed by western large landholders and a growing technocratic and bureaucratic elite concentrated in provincial towns and Saigon. More research is needed. What is nevertheless clear is that Orchard Heartland Gentry played a significant and overlooked role in the politics of the early decades of the twentieth century and the eventual formation of the Constitutionalist Party.

The second failure of the orthodox class frameworks is theoretical: it depicts the politics of the era as a simple reflection of the presumed material interests of these social groups.⁴³ This dissertation adopts an articulation approach to instead explain the birth of modern Vietnamese anti-Chinese politics, not as a reflection of existing class interest, but as an immanent yet unrealized class aspiration. As will become clearer over the course of the following chapters, the elite bloc behind *Talking Business* and the later Enlightened Renewal Movement combatted ethnic Chinese and Indian commercial dominance, not so much as an expression of their social character as capitalists, but rather to invent a capitalist class.⁴⁴ It was more than a program to transform local prestige and middling administrative power to economic power. At least in principle, the power was never intended to serve the mere private well-being of the individual capitalist, rather it was hegemonically advocated as part of a Saint-Simonian condemnation of the unproductive and parasitic social character of the prevailing class structures. These were invariably blamed for a whole range of social ills, from banditry and superstition to violence and ignorance. These crippling social problems would be solved, it was argued, if Vietnamese elites shunned frivolous consumption habits, usurious agricultural lending, ejected the parasitical Chinese and Indians, and invested their wealth in the sorts of productive enterprises which would nurture an honest and healthy Vietnamese proletariat. The movement was thus an attempt to fashion a national entrepreneurial ethos appropriate both to the novel conditions of colonial modernity and the ready to hand cultural vernacular. It responded to the turn of the century coincidence of new electoral institutions, colonial fiscal reforms, and the consequent opportunities for investment and pork barrel politics with a proliferation of arguments and ideas grounded in the received wisdom of the Confucian tradition.⁴⁵

This leads to one last revisionist thrust regarding the elite's political agenda. The anti-Chinese commercial nationalist program was first articulated in *Talking Business* in 1901, predating Phan Bội Châu's activities in the south by several years. It expressed longstanding local interests, not exilic revolutionary ideology. The movement was anti-immigrant and pro-business, not primarily anti-colonial. One of this dissertation's most provocative arguments is that the anticolonial

⁴³ This is most clearly at stake in the debate between David Marr and Jean Chesnaux, where Marr rejects Chesnaux's depiction of the bourgeois character of era by questioning whether the bourgeoisie was sufficiently large, "independent" and "viable". The logic being that, at a particular point in its development, a social class matures and its interests are mechanically reflected in the superstructure of political discourse. Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism 1885-1925*, 202.

⁴⁴ I am inspired by Przeworski, who demonstrates the illegitimacy of any simple identification between a supposed abstract *material interest* and a *class interest*. "Classes are not prior to political and ideological practice. Any definition of people as workers – or individuals, Catholics, French-speakers, Southerners, and the like – is necessarily immanent to the practice of political forces engaged in struggles to maintain or in various ways alter the existing social relations. Classes are organized and disorganized as outcomes of continuous struggles. Parties defining themselves as representing interests of various classes and parties purporting to represent the general interest, unions, newspapers, schools, public bureaucracies, civic and cultural associations, factories, armies and churches – all participate in the process of class formation in the course of struggles that fundamentally concern the very vision of society. Is the society composed of classes or of individuals with harmonious interests? Are classes the fundamental source of social cleavage or are they to be placed alongside any other social distinction? [...] These are the fundamental issues of ideological struggle. **The ideological struggle is a struggle about class before it is a struggle among classes.**" [emphasis mine], Adam Przeworski, *Capitalism and Social Democracy* (Cambridge University Press, 1985), 70.

⁴⁵ The durability of some of its slogans is striking. For example, "Wealthy People Strong Country," which was prominently featured in the debut issue of *Talking Business* in October 1901, is today a commonplace justification of the Communist Party of Vietnam's economic policy.

character of the 1907-1909 movement, while not wholly imagined, has been greatly exaggerated. When read on their own terms rather than through the police archives or histories of later nationalists, the Enlightened Renewal businesses reveal a coherent economic strategy: industrial production to compete for market share, social infrastructure to reduce transaction costs, and grassroots mobilization anchored in the provincial gentry. While I acknowledge student travel to Japan and a handful of confrontational writings from Gilbert Trần Chánh Chiêu, I don't find anti-colonialism to be a compelling characterization of the political program. It was first and foremost a business movement, not a failed revolution.

Sources and Methods

This dissertation's revisionist claims rest on source material that has been either newly available or insufficiently exploited by previous scholars. Three bodies of evidence are central.

The first body of evidence is drawn from two extraordinary texts by Nguyễn Liên Phong, a reporter for *Talking Business over Tea*, and itinerant Confucian gentleman whose nickname was "vagabond old teacher" [*lão sư giang hồ*]. His 1909 verse gazetteer *Figures and Folkways of the South* [*Nam Kỳ Phong Tục Nhơn Vật Diễn Ca*] and his 1915 companion collective biography *Verses of Homage* [*Điếu Cổ Hạ Kim Thi Tập*] together mention some 800 figures from across Cochinchina. Phong wrote to praise his hosts by connecting their wealth and achievements — and the colonial project as a whole — to their outstanding virtue and their contribution to a broader enterprise of Vietnamese settler colonization. By painstakingly tabulating the information associated with these figures — their office types, geographic locations, clan affiliations, and social networks — I have constructed a demographic and geographic portrait of the Cochinchinese elite on the eve of the First World War. These texts, which have received only passing attention from previous scholars, constitute the evidentiary foundation for Part 1 of this dissertation. Their verse form, rooted in Southern Han Nom literary traditions, makes them resistant to casual citation but uniquely rich for the sort of quantitative literary analysis this dissertation undertakes.

The second is the *quốc ngữ* periodical press, above all *Talking Business over Tea* (1901–1924) and *Six Provinces News* (1907–1944). These newspapers have been acknowledged as important by virtually every historian of the period, yet none has undertaken a sustained analysis of their content, editorial networks, or readership. The periodicals were produced by and for the Cochinchinese Vietnamese elite. They recorded debates, advertisements, investment appeals, letters from readers, serialized fiction, and editorial campaigns in the language of the actors themselves. Their recent digitization has made systematic analysis possible for the first time. This dissertation's close reading of these periodicals — particularly the anti-Chinese editorials, business prospectuses, and civic organization notices that fill their pages — constitutes the evidentiary backbone of Part 2.

The third body of evidence includes traditional archival and published material drawn from colonial archives held at the Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer in Aix-en-Provence and the National Archives No. 2 in Ho Chi Minh City. These include provincial administrative reports, police surveillance files, applications and charters for civic organizations such as learned societies and credit organizations, colonial council minutes, and correspondence between colonial officials regarding the regulation of native associations and commerce. While this dissertation is critical of the police narratives promoted by previous scholars, the administrative record remains indispensable for the institutional detail it preserves, including membership lists,

traces of local rivalries, and the paper trails left by Vietnamese civic initiatives as they navigated the colonial approval process.

Methodologically, the dissertation combines close reading of the periodical press and archival sources with quantitative analysis of the verse gazetteers, prosopographic tabulation, social network mapping, and historical GIS. This mixed-methods approach is unusual in Vietnamese historiography but follows the lead of promising recent developments in the field and draws on well-established traditions in Sinology.⁴⁶

Chapter Summary

The dissertation is divided into three parts. Part 1 establishes the environmental and social foundations of the Orchard Heartland Gentry by means of historical geography, prosopography, and quantitative literary analysis. Chapter 2 adopts a *longue durée* approach, tracking the movement from the Nguyễn "Water Frontier" to a twentieth century "Indochinese Moment" when domestic capital mobilization liberated entrepreneurial spirits among colonial administrators.⁴⁷ I demonstrate how the Mekong Delta's specific physical landscape fostered a distinct, rooted gentry class long before French arrival. I then shift to a social and ideological account of this specific elite by applying a novel quantitative analysis to Nguyễn Liên Phong's two texts. In Chapter 3, I tabulate the demographics and map the social networks of the early twentieth century elite to challenge the view of this elite as deracinated parvenus. In Chapter 4, I reveal them as the heirs of the precolonial gentry, whose worldview was defined by an uneasy "Franco-Nguyễn Détente" — a struggle to conserve traditional loyalties while touting the advances of colonial modernity by framing French patronage as an extension of longstanding Nguyễn settler colonization of the Mekong Delta.

Part 2 tracks the translation of this worldview into political action. Grounding my arguments in a close reading of the era's understudied press, I show how Vietnamese leaders responded to the Indochinese Moment by founding the political newspapers *Talking Business over Tea* and *Six Provinces News*. In Chapter 5, I contextualize the birth of *Talking Business* in the editors' business interests, and especially its founding Vietnamese editor, Lương Khắc Ninh's political fights in the Colonial Council. I interpret their breakout slogan of "big business" [đại thương] in light of these incentive structures, revealing it to be a rallying cry for the Orchard Heartland Gentry against Chinese immigrants. But Lương Khắc Ninh's initial years of passionate calls remained mostly talk, until the arrival of a new chief editor, Gilbert Trần Chánh Chiếu. Chapters 6 and 7 track Chiếu's contributions to the business movement, forming a highly revisionist account of his Enlightened Renewal Reform Movement. I situate his campaigns in the ecological and economic devastation of the 1904 Typhoons and the deposition of the Emperor Thành Thái, endeavoring to show that local dynamics, rather than exilic literati, were determinative. Chapter 6 details Chiếu's ideology as laid out in his Manifesto and in the pages of *Six Provinces News* and *Talking Business*. Chapter 7 examines the institutions founded as part of the Reform

⁴⁶ For example: Poisson, *Mandarins et subalternes au nord du Viêt Nam*; Aberdam, "Élites Cambodgiennes En Situation Coloniale, Essai d'histoire Sociale Des Réseaux de Pouvoir Dans l'administration Cambodgienne Sous Le Protectorat Français (1860-1953)."; Nicolas Tackett, "The Digital Turn and New Modes of Historical Inquiry," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 83, no. 1 (2023): 153–65.

⁴⁷ Nola Cooke and Li Tana, eds., *Water Frontier: Commerce and the Chinese in the Lower Mekong Region, 1750-1880* (Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, 2004); Gerard Sasges, "Scaling the Commanding Heights: The Colonial Conglomerates and the Changing Political Economy of French Indochina," *Modern Asian Studies* 49, no. 5 (2015): 1485–525, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X14000389>.

Movement, showing that they correspond better to longstanding business movement objectives held by the Orchard Heartland Gentry than to front organizations for clandestine student travel to China and Japan.

Part 3 resolves the historical and historiographical conflicts staged in Part 2 by addressing three questions. Historiographically, how is it that historians overlooked local dynamics in favor of an account of exilic literati and their foiled plans for revolutionary subterfuge? Historically, if not exilic literati, then what explains the collapse of the Reform Movement? And lastly, as a denouement, what were the local social legacies of the movement after Gilbert Chiếu's arrest and acquittal in 1909? Chapter 8 responds to the historiographical question by critiquing the sources traditionally used to explain the movement's failure. It introduces the concept of "police historiography" to describe the narrative constructed by the colonial security state which magnified threats to justify bureaucratic expansion. The chapter argues that historians have uncritically adopted these police categories, leading to a mischaracterization of the Reform Movement as an anti-colonial revolutionary network linked to Phan Bội Châu, rather than a pro-business reform movement based firmly in the local elite. Chapter 9 then offers a revisionist account of the movement's collapse. By looking beyond the police archives, it locates an internecine rivalry in the class factions mapped out in Part 1 — specifically, conflicts between the provincial Gilbert Chiếu and high-ranking Saigon elites Lê Văn Trung, Diệp Văn Cương, and Trần Bá Thọ. The chapter concludes that the movement's failure was ultimately caused by this intra-elite factionalism, with its concomitant commercial and reputational rivalries, rather than simple French colonial repression. The dissertation then closes with a coda showing how, though temporarily cowed by Chiếu's spectacular arrest, the Orchard Heartland Gentry's civic organizational energy shifted into forming mutual study and credit organizations which formed the institutional skeleton of the Constitutionalist Party and culminated in the boycotts of 1919.

The Setting: The Orchard Heartland from Water Frontier to Indochinese Moment

The term Orchard Heartland is a translation of the Vietnamese toponym *Miệt Vườn*.⁴⁸ The term has wide currency across both scholarship and popular culture, with artists and writers often invoking the *miệt vườn* to metonymically refer to the Mekong Delta as a whole. Literary critics employ the term for a subgenre of Vietnamese literature characterized by the prominence it gives to the unique riverine ecology of Delta life.⁴⁹ While the producers of popular variety shows employ the term to showcase the region's musical legacy—above all folksy ballads drawn from Vietnamese reform opera [cải lương].⁵⁰ Although the term remains little used in anglophone scholarship, it also appears prominently in Vietnamese writing on the region. The fiction author, folklorist and historian Sơn Nam developed the concept across a series of texts, most important of which was his 1970 monograph *Văn Minh Miệt Vườn* [orchard heartland civilization].⁵¹ Diverging from today's common parlance, Sơn Nam defined the *Miệt Vườn* as a specific Mekong Delta subregion: a historical Goldilocks zone of raised ridges surrounded by less hospitable acidic soils and brackish floodplains.

This dissertation argues that early twentieth century Cochinchinese political movements must be understood in light of two conditions which prevailed at the end of the nineteenth century. The first is a particular Orchard Heartland elite who played a hitherto unappreciated role in the era's culture and politics. The second is the convergence of a series of political and economic crises and reforms which were seized upon by the native elite to articulate a project for national renewal. This chapter establishes those two conditions by adopting a *longue durée* approach that moves from geography to political economy, tracking the formation of the Orchard Heartland as a zone of settlement and contestation, and the emergence within it of a rooted provincial gentry whose fate was shaped by the region's distinctive ecology long before the French conquest.

The chapter proceeds in four stages. I begin with the physical landscape of the delta itself, paying special attention to the ancient beach ridges known locally as *giồng*. Raised soils and protection from seasonal flooding made the *giồng* the focal points of early Vietnamese agricultural colonization, and the heartland of rural elite I call the Orchard Heartland Gentry. Borrowing from Nola Cooke and Li Tana, I then review the making of the Nguyễn "Water Frontier," showing how the commercial dynamism of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries drew settlers into the delta.⁵² Over the century these settlers established a plural-society structure with a Vietnamese

⁴⁸ My use of the term "heartland" here involves some poetic license. The term *miệt* is a southern colloquial term for "an area." It has a folksy ring to it, somewhat analogous to the English "yonder," though the comparison is imperfect, since yonder is primarily a statement of distance, whereas *miệt* has a prepositional function similar to "by the" or "in the". I have chosen the term "heartland" to transmit the folksiness and rural character of the term.

⁴⁹ See for example, Nguyễn Lã, "Linh hồn sông nước của văn hóa 'miệt vườn' trong văn xuôi Nam Bộ | Diễn đàn Câu lạc bộ Văn đoàn Độc lập Việt Nam," paper presented at Hội thảo khoa học quốc tế "Sinh thái và văn hóa Nam Bộ trong văn học Việt Nam," January 15, 2002, <https://vanviet.info/nghien-cuu-phe-binh/linh-hn-sng-nuoc-cu%cc%89a-van-hoa-mi%cc%a3t-vuon-trong-van-xui-nam-b%cc%a3/>; Nguyễn Vy Khanh, "Hiện Tượng 'Miệt Vườn' Qua Vài Tác Giả," *Ngôn Ngữ: Tạp Chí Văn Học. Nghệ Thuật* 17 (January 2022): 74.

⁵⁰ See for example, "NGÔI SAO MIỆT VƯỜN MÙA 1 - TẬP FULL," YouTube, accessed March 18, 2026, http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLVpxV5Jck205Bn1klkKPygL_b3ImT4Eu.

⁵¹ Sơn Nam, *Đồng Bằng Sông Cửu Long- Nét Sinh Hoạt Xưa & Văn Minh Miệt Vườn* (1970; Nhà xuất bản Trẻ, 2018).

⁵² Cooke and Tana, *Water Frontier*.

gentry, Chinese merchants, and peripheral indigenous Khmers and Catholic refugees.⁵³ The renegotiation of this plural society would become a crucial aspect of the early 20th century political crisis. A third section follows the fracture of this coalition under the centralizing pressures of the nineteenth-century Nguyễn court, and the conditions which drove some of its constituents into French colonial collaboration. Finally, I describe the turn-of-the-century conjuncture that I call, following Gerard Sasges, the "Indochinese Moment" — when the collapse of the Chinese revenue-farm regime and the construction of a new fiscal and institutional apparatus opened, for the first time, the political and economic space within which the Orchard Heartland Gentry could organize.⁵⁴

The Mekong Delta Landscape

Three environmental features define the Mekong Delta. First are the reliable seasonal monsoons which form a maritime highway connecting East Asian and Indian Ocean markets. Second is the river itself, which provides access to the resource rich Cambodian floodplains, highland forests, and the Korat Plateau. These two external features are complemented by a third internal characteristic particular to the Delta itself-- a series of ancient beach ridges strung between long interrIDGE swales. These features break the space into distinct zones of raised hillocks, which are suitable to cash crops, and vast floodplains crisscrossed by canals which are suitable for wet rice.

Southeast Asia's distinctive monsoons originate in the seasonal warming and cooling of the Himalayan range and the Tibetan Plateau. Each year heat builds up over the west Australian summer, passes over the Indian Ocean, and is funneled northeast, dumping its moisture over mainland Southeast Asia from May to October. From November to April the winds reverse, blowing dry, cooler air out of the Asian landmass, and dividing the year into distinct wet and dry seasons. Merchants based in the Indian Ocean and East China Sea timed their annual trips by the predictable and comparative mild winds, driving a lively ocean-going trade which shaped the societies inhabiting the littoral.⁵⁵

Southeast Asia's rivers also originate 5,000 meters high on the northeast rim of the Tibetan Plateau.⁵⁶ Five finger-like cordilleras cross the Southeast Asian Massif between Bangladesh and Guangxi. These divide the mainland into four major river basins and plateaus: the Irrawaddy, the Chao Phraya, the Mekong, and the Red. The Mekong rapidly descends from the meltwaters of Tibet, dropping 4,500 meters by time it crosses into the Laotian plains. It descends only 500 meters for the remaining 1,700 kilometers of travel. From the highlands of Laos, the river carves a gorge into the eastern end of the Khorat plateau, from whence it drains the wealth of the Siamese northeast by way of the Mun and Chi tributaries. The Mekong's eastern bank collects the runoff from the gently sloping western face of the Annamese Cordillera. This range's steep

⁵³ The "plural society" was an idea coined by the Fabian reformist colonial civil servant of British Burma John Furnivall to describe a condition, common across the Southeast Asian colonies, wherein high political and commercial office was dominated by Europeans, agriculture and middling administrative positions were held by the native ethnic majority group while the majority of commerce was dominated by an ethnic minority. See John Sydenham Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice: A Comparative Study of Burma and Netherlands India* (CUP Archive, 1956).

⁵⁴ Sasges, "Scaling the Commanding Heights."

⁵⁵ Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, 1450-1680: The Lands Below the Winds* (Yale University Press, 1988).

⁵⁶ V. R. Pantulu, "The Mekong River System," in *The Ecology of River Systems*, ed. Bryan R. Davies and Keith F. Walker (Springer Science & Business Media, 2013).

eastern face formed blocked the Siamese and Cambodian interiors off from Vietnamese settlers, who were instead channeled south hugging the coast in the 17th Century.

Before widespread canal construction in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Mekong Delta was part of an extensive seasonal floodplain which stretched from the northern reaches of the Tonle Sap Lake, ran over the whole western bank of the Hậu (Bassac) River, and drained into the Gulf of Siam. The Tonle Sap drains into the Mekong at contemporary Phnom Penh, where, despite still having more than 300 kilometers to travel before it reaches the sea, the river is already tidal (see figure 1). From Phnom Penh, the Mekong splits into two major distributaries: the Hậu, meaning back, and the Tiền, meaning front.⁵⁷ These two pillars flow south-southeast and anchor a latticework of aimlessly wandering canals and ponds. Before widespread drainage works, the waterways shifted with itinerant dunes and silty bars. Vast swaths of the region were a spongy thicket of mangroves and water palms, impenetrable on foot, but perforated throughout by sojourners, fishermen and traders who plied routes into the Cambodian interior.

Today, the delta fans out from Phnom Penh to cover more than 40,000 square kilometers, stretching from the Ha Tien floodplains in the west, south to the U Minh swamps. It's bounded on the north by the Plain of Reeds marshland, and on east by the Vàm Cỏ river. The northeast is rimmed by a tropical savannah which shades into the foothills of the Annamese Cordillera in Tay Ninh. In geological terms, the Delta is new. At the last glacial maximum (c. 21,000 years ago) mean global sea levels were 135 meters lower, exposing a continental shelf linking mainland and island Southeast Asia into a single landmass. Two bouts of rapid glacial melting, at roughly 14,000 and 11,000 years ago, inundated the shelf, and the land bridge between the islands and mainland disappeared by about 8,500 years ago.⁵⁸ At this time, the shoreline ran northeast of contemporary Hồ Chí Minh City, across Thủ Dầu Một into Phnom Penh, and then southwest into the Gulf of Thailand near the current location of the Vĩnh Tế Canal. When sea levels fell, sediment began a six-thousand-year process of depositing new landmass. If we use the current location of cities as landmarks, by 4,500 years ago, the shore was at Long Xuyên and Sa Đéc, by 3,000 it had reached Cần Thơ and Cai Lậy, by 1,500 Trà Vinh, Mỹ Tho, and northern Bến Tre had been formed. It has since stabilized and has now begun to recede.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ I've opted for the Vietnamese terms. It should be acknowledged these reflect their own perspective as settlers who entered the region from the northeast.

⁵⁸ Hie Lim Kim et al., "Prehistoric Human Migration between Sundaland and South Asia Was Driven by Sea-Level Rise," *Communications Biology* 6, no. 1 (2023): 150, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s42003-023-04510-0>.

⁵⁹ Junhui Wang et al., "Construction and Destruction of an Autogenic Grade System: The Late Holocene Mekong River Delta, Vietnam," *Geology* 47, no. 7 (2019): 669–72, <https://doi.org/10.1130/G45872.1>.

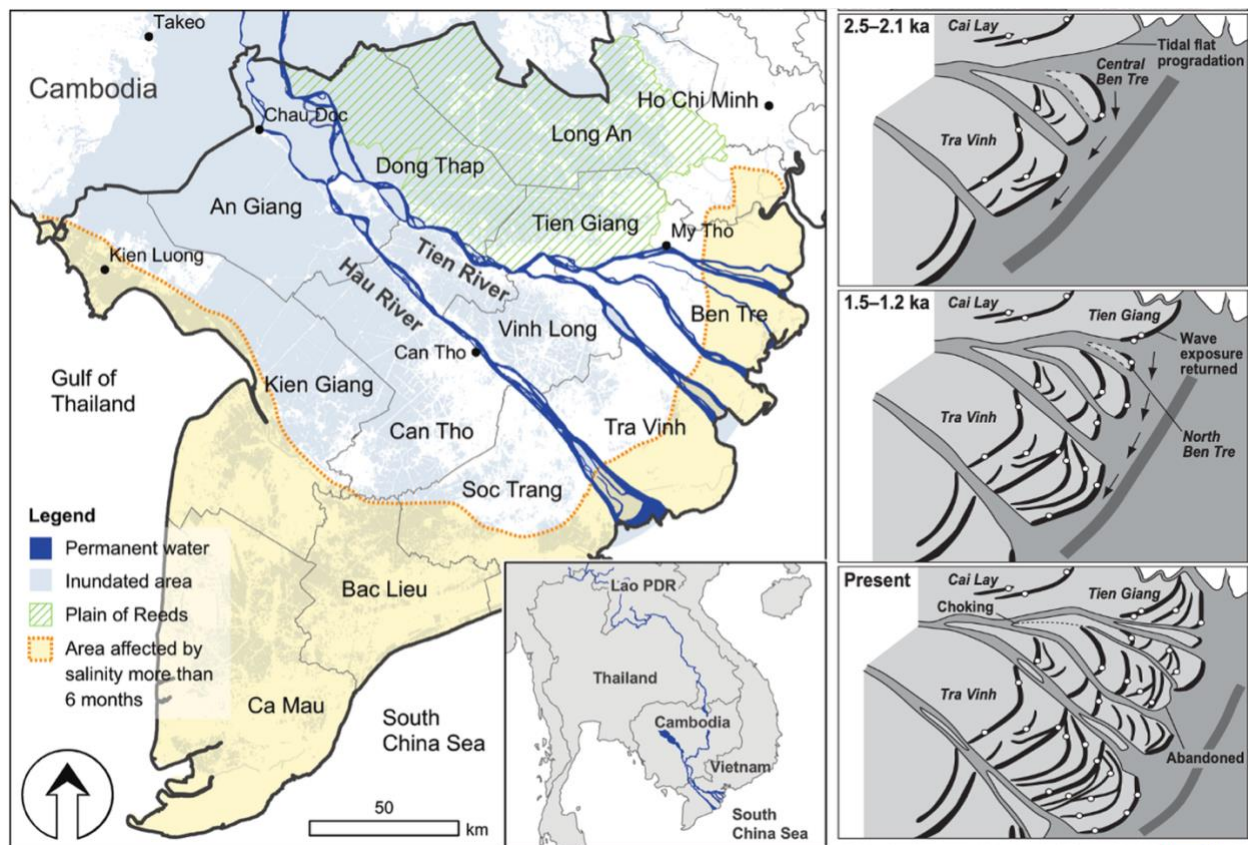


Figure 1 Left: areas of inundation and soil salinity. Right: the process of *giồng* formation

The Delta's otherwise vast flat expanse is broken up by culturally important long hillocks, known locally as *giồng*. These were formed as a converging sequence of shore-parallel beach ridges.⁶⁰ A combination of silt deposition and wave action raised these ridges from sandy bars and islands. The buildup closed off and silted up large inland lagoons. The ridges, or *giồng*, reach dozens of kilometers in length but are seldom more than a few kilometers wide. They tend to be less than 5 meters above sea level and are separated by roughly 5-kilometer-wide inter-ridge swales which formed from the silted up inland lagoons. Pictured in figure 1, the ridges are shorter and denser along the eastern Tien River distributaries because silt is dragged southwest by wave action during the winter monsoon.

The *giồng* were focal points for early Vietnamese agricultural colonization. Their soil is well-suited to vegetables and cash crops such as citrus, betel, and coconuts. They are better protected from flooding and have more reliable access to clean well water. The *ruộng*-- the troughs between *giồng*--are easily irrigated and form the foundation for the delta's famously bountiful rice fields but are less well protected from flooding and disease.

⁶⁰ Toru Tamura et al., "Origin and Evolution of Interdistributary Delta Plains; Insights from Mekong River Delta," *Geology* 40, no. 4 (2012): 303–6, <https://doi.org/10.1130/G32717.1>.

Not only do the eastern distributaries of the Tiền River benefit from a denser network of canals and *giông*, but they also sit in a goldilocks zone between seasonal inundation, brackish water and acidic marshland soil. Figure 1 shows the topography of salt intrusion, seasonal inundation, and the acidic marshlands of the plain of reeds. Much of the Delta's vast expanse was historically challenging terrain to cultivate. Too far downstream, one contended with brackish water and soil salinity. The problem was sufficiently grave that fishing and beeswax gathering communities in the forests of Cà Mau imported fresh water by junk.⁶¹ Even in the better settled southern fringes of Trà Vinh and Bến Tre, insufficient rains could leave the soil unfit for cultivation.

But travelling upriver or west was no solution, as one confronted dramatic seasonal flooding. Large portions of the arable land along the western banks of the Tiền River in Vĩnh Long and zones upriver of Cao Lãnh spent much of the rainy season totally submerged. The Hậu River was even worse, with the whole western bank under as much as two meters of water for months at a time. While this inundation had the commercial benefit of connecting the Gulf of Siam to the Mekong Basin in Cambodia, it was a powerful obstacle to agricultural settlement and cultivation.

Taken together, the density of hospitable beach ridges and relative protection from flooding and salt intrusion made the eastern section of the Mekong Delta the most attractive site for agricultural settlement. This highly desirable land, colored white in Figure 1, is the Orchard Heartland, the old Vietnamese cultural core of the Mekong Delta, and home to an elite whose character and fate is the topic of this study.

The Water Frontier and the Making of the Nguyễn South

The Orchard Heartland's geographic features played an important role in a transregional commercial network connecting the Cambodian interior to maritime Southeast Asia and China during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁶² The intensified trade of the early modern period was vital to Vietnamese and Chinese migration southward.

Although this so-called Southward March [*nam tiến*] remade the ethnic and political composition of the region, recent scholarship has shown that the process was by no means a simple transplanting of a stereotypical Red River Delta-based agrarian Vietnamese culture into southern zones previously ruled by Cham peoples. Rather, Nguyễn Cochinchina was a hybrid, commercial, and ethnically fluid society which had its political core spread over the littoral of the Central Region, and which had an agrarian basis in mixed Sino-Vietnamese and Khmer settler communities colonizing the Mekong Delta "Water Frontier".⁶³ The colonial era intra-Vietnamese and Sino-Vietnamese economic and political rivalries which dominated the early 20th Century and which concern this dissertation find their origins in the constituencies arising from Nguyễn-led settler colonization and foreclosure of this once porous zone.

⁶¹ Nola Cooke, "Water World: Chinese and Vietnamese on the Riverine Water Frontier, from Ca Mau to Tonle Sap (1850-1884)," in *Water Frontier: Commerce and the Chinese in the Lower Mekong Region, 1750-1880*, ed. Li Tana and Nola Cooke (Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, 2004), 142.

⁶² Anthony Reid, "An 'Age of Commerce' in Southeast Asian History," *Modern Asian Studies* 24, no. 1 (1990): 1–30, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X00001153>; Leonard Blussé, "Chinese Century. The Eighteenth Century in the China Sea Region," *Archipel* 58, no. 3 (1999): 107–29, <https://doi.org/10.3406/arch.1999.3537>.

⁶³ The main work here was undertaken by Li Tana across a number of edited volumes and monographs. Tana Li, *Nguyễn Cochinchina: Southern Vietnam in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Southeast Asia Program Publications, 1998); Cooke and Tana, *Water Frontier*; Tana Li, *A Maritime Vietnam: From Earliest Times to the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge University Press, 2024).

The Nguyễn were originally a powerful military clan who fled south in 1600 to escape infighting with the Trịnh clan in the Lê court.⁶⁴ Within a quarter century they had accumulated sufficient power in the area around Hue that they ceased paying taxes to the court in 1624 and beat back seven different Trịnh expeditions between 1627 and 1672. Although the Trịnh, based in the populous and agriculturally rich Red River Delta, enjoyed resource and manpower advantages, the Nguyễn oversaw the elaboration of a new form of Vietnamese state, unprecedented for its dependence on maritime trade, naval power and export-led cash cropping.

The geographic features of the central coast conditioned the Nguyễn's seventeenth century maritime orientation. The region lacked expansive river deltas. While the relatively small river systems which flowed down from the Annamite Cordillera provided a commercial access to valuable forest goods, their deltas were too narrow and disconnected to form the foundations for expansive grain empires. Thus, before the widespread settlement of the Mekong region in the eighteenth century, the Nguyễn flourished chiefly as trade nexus and pirate empire.

The Nguyễn's immediately developed this maritime orientation. During its wars with the Trịnh in the first half of the seventeenth century, the Nguyễn expanded its fleet of war galleys from 100 to 230. In 1643, Nguyễn naval power was sufficient to destroy a small fleet of Dutch warships.⁶⁵ As the Nguyễn projected power further south, it captured Cham trading ports along the littoral. Cut off from the cultural core and absorbing rival polities, Cochinchina developed a hybrid society, with the Nguyễn adapting Malay style vessels, and incorporating Vietnamized versions of Cham rituals. The Nguyễn's coastal outlook is also evident in the way maritime salvage and piracy operations appears to have contributed significantly to the Nguyễn resources, with Chinese and European travelers both testifying to the official nature of its maritime predation.

Although geographic constraints conditioned the Nguyễn's maritime orientation, its success and expansion into the Mekong Delta would have been impossible without the regional growth in commerce that characterized the period. This "Age of Commerce" was characterized by a triangular trade linking Indian cotton, Southeast Asian rice, spices and forest goods, and East Asian silver, silk and porcelains.⁶⁶ Of particular importance to Nguyễn Cochinchina was an official ban on trade between China and Japan. Faifo developed as a crucial regional entrepot, providing a convenient site for Japanese and Chinese commercial exchange. It was located near both countries, it was a source of desirable precious woods, silk and sugar, and it was close enough to the chief Southeast Asian spice producers to act as an emporium for regional commodities. The Nguyễn embraced this role by maintaining competitively low port duties. By the 1640s Cochinchina had become Japan's chief trading partner.⁶⁷

The centrality of trade left indelible marks on the Nguyễn economic and political structure which continued despite upheavals in the regional commercial and political terrain. The state extended south, conquering the Cham and establishing a series of coastal fortresses attached to market towns and regional ports.⁶⁸ A significant portion of the land and labor near the central coast political center was devoted to cash cropping of sugar, pepper, and silk—an arrangement that

⁶⁴ Keith W. Taylor, "Nguyễn Hoàng and the Beginning of Vietnam's Southward Expansion," in *Southeast Asia in the Early Modern Era: Trade, Power, and Belief*, ed. Anthony J. S. Reid (Cornell University Press, 2018).

⁶⁵ Li, *A Maritime Vietnam*, 228–54.

⁶⁶ Reid, "An 'Age of Commerce' in Southeast Asian History."

⁶⁷ Li, *A Maritime Vietnam*, 246–50.

⁶⁸ Li, *A Maritime Vietnam*, 238.

required large imports of rice from the Mekong Delta.⁶⁹ This commercial agriculture was facilitated by advance-credit systems provided by Canton merchants, and by the mid 18th century Cochinchina saw a 40 fold increase in sugar exports. The historian Li Tana goes so far as to claim that “the Nguyễn court acted as the agent of the Canton junks trading in its realm, collecting, and sometimes organizing production for Canton and other overseas markets.”⁷⁰

Settlement of the delta accelerated after the Qing destroyed the last Ming bases in South China and Taiwan at the end of the seventeenth century. Though one might expect Qing trade restrictions to hurt the Nguyễn economy, they benefited from this upheaval. As an unrecognized rebel power themselves, the Nguyễn had long carried on trade with the Ming rebel forces on the Chinese southern coast, Taiwan and Nagasaki.⁷¹ When the Ming fled China, thousands turned to the Nguyễn for help. They were dispatched to the Mekong Delta, near the Mỹ Tho and Biên Hoà areas where they expanded agricultural and commercial inroads into the Cambodian interior. Once the Koxinga threat was neutralized in the south, the Kangxi emperor instituted the so-called Open Door Policy in 1684, establishing the country's first maritime customs offices and lifting the maritime trade ban instituted to deny goods to remnant Taiwan-based Ming partisans but had devastated the maritime societies of the southern coast, Guangdong and Fujian.⁷² Although Chinese and other sojourners had frequented the Mekong region for hundreds of years, the arrival of Ming refugees and subsequent reopening of commerce was a turning point in the settlement of the “Water Frontier.” A mix of merchants, soldiers, pirates, and literati-- hailing chiefly from Canton and Fujian-- entered directly into the Nguyễn administration as local officials, and particularly as officers in charge of customs and trade [tàu bộ] further linking the Nguyễn state to the Canton trade.⁷³

Three Cantonese groups established the commercial geography that would shape the region for the next two centuries. Chen Shangchuan (Trần Thượng Xuyên), a general of the Ming rebel Longmen corps, entered the Saigon River mouth at Cần Giỏi and settled upstream at an old Khmer fortress in modern Biên Hòa—this would become the center of Chinese commerce in Cochinchina and eventually seed the community that became Saigon's historic Chinatown, Chợ Lớn. Yang Yandi (Dương Ngạn Địch), commander of a pirate force driven from the Tonkin Gulf by Qing pacification campaigns, entered the nearby Tiền River and in 1679 settled what would become the Orchard Heartlands core zone of Cái Bè-Mỹ Tho. Further south, Mạc Cửu established Hà Tiên on the Gulf of Thailand coast, creating a key node in the westward traffic of goods from the Cambodian interior to Siam.⁷⁴

Vietnamese migration followed close on the heels of the Chinese refugees. The first Vietnamese villages were settled at the end of the seventeenth century in Mộ Xoài and Đồng Nai, east of

⁶⁹ Li, *A Maritime Vietnam*, 258.

⁷⁰ Li, *A Maritime Vietnam*, 262–63.

⁷¹ Li, *A Maritime Vietnam*, 250.

⁷² Gang Zhao, *The Qing Opening to the Ocean: Chinese Maritime Policies, 1684–1757* (University of Hawaii Press, 2013), 116.

⁷³ Claudine Salmon, “Réfugiés Ming dans les Mers du sud vus à travers diverses inscriptions (ca. 1650-ca. 1730),” *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient* 90, no. 1 (2003): 183, <https://doi.org/10.3406/befeo.2003.3613>.

⁷⁴ Robert J. Antony, ““Righteous Yang”: Pirate, Rebel, and Hero on the Sino-Vietnamese Water Frontier, 1644–1684,” *Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review* 1, no. 11 (2014), <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/72n5w62r>.

modern Hồ Chí Minh City.⁷⁵ After the last vestiges of Champa were eliminated in 1693, Vietnamese settlers gathered around Chinese trading posts, with the first military districts formally established in Biên Hoà and near contemporary Hồ Chí Minh in 1698. Settlers followed Nguyễn campaigns into Cambodia, continuing south-southwest along a prominent grouping of ancient beach ridges that stretch from the west side of the Vaico Orientale, in modern Tân An, down through Mỹ Tho, and west into Cai Lậy, terminating just shy of Cái Bè where they formed Long Hồ camp in 1732.

Here the Vietnamese encountered a broad series of *giồng* which separated the Đồng Tháp Mười marshlands from the Tiền main branch near the Cỏ Chiên and Hàm Luông forks. This area would become the home of the Orchard Heartland elite. It is known colloquially as the Ba Giồng, or Three Ridges area.⁷⁶ Its location was crucial, not only did it sit at a convenient point for river freighters to gather and resupply while they awaited favorable tides, but it also rested in a zone of fertile alluvial soils. The Three Ridges were physically bounded off from the acid sulfate marshes of Đồng Tháp Mười, were sufficiently downriver to escape the annual floodplain, and sufficiently far from the coast to shield it from excessive soil salinity and a seasonal lack of fresh water. This medial zone defined the Orchard Heartlands. It was centered in the Three Ridges area and neighboring ridges and islets, but stretched as far as Cao Lãnh upriver, and as far down river as Cái Môn and Bến Tre. The broader beach ridges supported larger settlements, and the water table was close to the surface, making well water more reliable. Rice could be transplanted without ploughing in the interrIDGE swales. Atop the ridges, the soil was well adapted to commercial crops like betel, citrus, coconuts, mulberry, melons, beans, sweet potatoes and cabbages. In many places, trees didn't even need to be watered.⁷⁷

The character of Orchard Heartland settler communities before the nineteenth century is a matter of speculation, but signs point to a mix of low density and relative wealth.⁷⁸ Settlers tended to come from Nguyễn core provinces of Thuận Hoá, Quảng Nam, and Quảng Ngãi.⁷⁹ Many were

⁷⁵ These appear to have initially been ethnically mixed zones of habitation, though there is some evidence that Vietnamese very early displaced Khmers from the land. Li Tana argues that non-Vietnamese still lived in long-established farming communities in lowland regions as far north as Quang Ngai into the 20th Century, and that Chinese immigration made up for a significant portion of Nguyễn population growth. Thus in 1805, a highpoint of migration from the Central Region to the Mekong Delta, there were 20,241 Minh Huong (Sino-Vietnamese creoles) registered as villagers in central coastal province Quang Nam. This implies near parity between registered creoles and Vietnamese villagers. Li, *Nguyễn Cochinchina*, 34.; Nevertheless, early nineteenth century Nguyễn gazetteers described ethnic displacement. Trịnh Hoài Đức writes that “The first territories of Gia Định were Mô Xoài and Đồng Nai, in these two places our people came together with Khmers and cleared the land. The Khmers so admired our dynasty’s moral authority that they yielded the land to us and moved on to some other place.” Trịnh Hoài Đức, *Gia Định Thành Thông Chí* (Nhà xuất bản Tổng hợp Đồng Nai, 2005), 109.

⁷⁶ Sơn Nam, *Đất Gia Định xưa - Bến Nghé xưa - Người Sài Gòn: biên khảo* (Nhà Xuất Bản Trẻ, 2021), 19–20; *Nam bộ xưa & nay* (Nhà xuất bản Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh, 2002), 80.

⁷⁷ Sơn Nam, *Lịch sử khẩn hoang miền Nam: khảo cứu* (Xuân Thu, 1983), 30–31.

⁷⁸ Li Tana gives a mixed picture. Her early work emphasizes that the area “did not become populous with Vietnamese” before the late eighteenth century Tây Sơn Wars. She adds that, “it’s no coincidence that for the whole Nguyễn period not a single figure survives for the villages south of Quang Nam. Far southern villages were particularly loose and unstable.” But her later work provides countervailing evidence, emphasizing the extreme material wealth of the region, the widespread use of imported textiles and porcelains, and contrasting it with the post war poverty and devastation. Li, *Nguyễn Cochinchina*, 30; Li, *A Maritime Vietnam*, 276.

⁷⁹ One study of 261 recorded genealogies in Ben Tre showed that 36% had settled there before the 19th Century. 98 of the 261 genealogies mentioned the families’ previous homelands, of which 59 were from Quảng Nam, 24 from Thuận Hoá, and 13 from an unspecified location in the central region. Only 2 of the 98 were from the former Trịnh

part of a patriciate who settled as part of state sponsored campaigns.⁸⁰ They migrated in as clans composed of dozens of families and hundreds of livestock. They enslaved the indigenous communities of the foothills to supplement the labor supply. Even if we assume the numbers of oxen and serfs is inflated in imperial records, we come away with a picture of settlements that differ in fundamental ways from the typical Red River Delta model: weak village communal organizations, low communal property, and a very high proportion of unregistered to registered village members.

lands north of Quảng Bình. Anecdotal evidence from Orchard Heartland high elites corroborates such backgrounds. The Queen Mother of emperor Tự Đức for example, a celebrity to colonial collaborators and an object of intense scorn by revolutionaries like Phan Bội Châu, was born in Giồng Sơn Quy, Gò Công to a chief minister of the Nguyễn Dynasty. Her paternal great-grandfather emigrated from the central region province of Quang Ngãi. Similarly, Trần Hưng Đạt, father to one of Gia Long's wives, was born in Gia Định, but his father was *tri phủ* in Thừa Thiên who participated in campaigns against Cambodia and later served as secretary of the military districts Trấn Biên (Biên Hoà) and Hà Tiên. The Family traced its roots back to Thanh Hoá. Several of Gia Long's trusted generals from the Tây Sơn period show a similar pattern. For example, Huỳnh Đức, was born in 1748 at Giồng Cai Yển (Cánh Én, now Khánh Hậu). His father migrated south from the capital as part of the 1731 campaigns against Cambodia, which led to the formal annexation of Mỹ Tho and Vĩnh Long areas. Especially noteworthy is the Viceroy of Gia Định, Lê Văn Duyệt. Born in 1763, he seems to have been an outcast child of a gentry family who sheltered Nguyễn Anh and his troops in the Three Ridges Area during his flight from the Tây Sơn. Duyệt's family may be more typical of autonomous settlers who moved south outside of imperial military service. His grandfather was from Quang Ngãi, and, Sơn Nam speculates, part of the first wave of settlers. See: *Địa chí Bến Tre* (Nhà xuất bản Khoa học xã hội, 2001); Đặng Thu, ed., *Di dân của người Việt từ thế kỷ X đến giữa thế kỷ XIX* (Trung tâm khoa học xã hội và nhân văn quốc gia, Trung tâm nghiên cứu dân số và phát triển, 1994), 98,119.; Both cited in: Phan Huy Lê, *Vùng đất Nam Bộ: quá trình hình thành và phát triển* (Nhà xuất bản Chính trị quốc gia - Sự thật, 2016), 477. Sơn Nam, *Đất Gia Định xưa - Bến Nghé Giới xưa - Người Sài Gòn*, 35–36.

⁸⁰ A passage a late 18th century report is worth translating at length, “From the inlets at Cần Giờ, Soài Lấp, the Đại and Tiểu, it was completely forested for thousands of leagues, the Nguyễn attacked Cambodia and took this land, then mobilized men of means from Quảng Nam, especially the prefectures of Điện Bàn, Quảng Ngãi, Quy Nhơn. They chopped all the trees, razing everything for settlers to plant betel and build their homes. They captured the savages at the headwaters and sold them as slaves. The curly-haired and dark-skinned, the true savages, sold for 20 quan, the lighter-skinned were 10 quan higher in price. These were formed into couples, and their children were civilized. They worked as farmers, and for this reason rice became plentiful. The rich, depending on the location, numbered 40-50 households, or 20-30 households. Each household had 50-60 serfs, and 300-400 buffalo. [...] The land was crisscrossed with canals, and it was unfit for travel by foot. Traders attached smaller craft to their river freighters so they could ply the canals. From the river mouths to the headwaters was six days travel, the whole way was nothing but vast fields as far as the eye could see, perfect for rice, which always grew white and chewy.” He doesn't provide specific settlement and location names, and it's unclear in what way the pattern described was spatially and temporally arranged. It seems valid to speculate that six days travel from the inlets of the Tiểu, Đại, Soài Lấp and Cần Giờ, would cover all the most densely populated areas of both Giadinh and the Mekong Delta. Lê Quý Đôn, *Phủ biên tạp lục* (Nhà xuất bản Văn hóa - thông tin, 2007), 442.

point in their lives, some drafted into service at the provincial and national level, but most as locally organized regiments recruited and commanded by district gentry elites.⁸² The state incentivized the formation of such militia elements and employed them in the settler colonial project. Men who could organize a regiment to clear new delta land were given an official rank which exempted them from taxes, and even in the 20th century, a significant minority of Orchard Heartland elites traced their ancestry to such programs.⁸³ In the Mekong Delta, the Nguyễn found a useful social outlet for this mix of elite aspirants and marginal populations.⁸⁴ With its loose villages and frontier jungles, those fleeing debts or displaced by war, disaster and famine could move relatively freely through this ‘Water Frontier’, assuming new identities while benefiting from state subsidies for clearing new land in hopes of one day formalizing ownership.⁸⁵

But the economic tailwinds were short-lived. In 1771, a widespread monetary crisis precipitated a localized tax revolt among highland groups in the foothills of the Central Region. The uprising grew into a catastrophic 30-year civil war which saw the complete destruction of the Trịnh and Nguyễn realms. The Tay Son War (1771-1802), named after the rebel, saw thriving southern cities plundered and laid waste. Chinese merchants were identified as rival strategic assets and singled out by raiding parties for wholesale massacres.⁸⁶ The disruption of trade permanently transformed the economic geography. However, even though the ravages of war initiated the Water Frontier’s economic decline, they also transformed the region from a political backwater to the heart of Nguyễn military power.

From a Nguyễn Stronghold to Colonial Cochinchina

The sole surviving heir, Nguyễn Ánh, fled the capital on the Central Coast and rebuilt his forces with the aid of Southern notables concentrated in the Mekong Delta. Of his fabled “tiger generals”, only one was born outside the Orchard Heartlands.⁸⁷ In a context where generals personally recruited armies as an interlocking hierarchy of loyalties, the fact that the vast majority of Nguyễn Ánh’s general staff were Delta natives speaks to strength of his networks in the region.⁸⁸ By the time Nguyễn Ánh began his long counter-offensive to unify the country between 1789 to 1802, he straddled a modernized military with Mekong Delta roots.

Two foreign groups were vital to Nguyễn Ánh’s military modernization. Like other regional potentates who were simultaneously consolidating absolutist regimes, the Nguyễn relied on

⁸² Li, *Nguyễn Cochinchina*, 40.; The Nguyễn state remained intensely militaristic even into the nineteenth century, see: George Dutton, “From Civil War to Uncivil Peace: The Vietnamese Army and the Early Nguyễn State (1802–1841),” *South East Asia Research* 24, no. 2 (2016): 167–84.

⁸³ See Chapter 3 of this dissertation.

⁸⁴ Importantly, a disproportionate number of these were or became Christians. Some of the oldest graveyards in the Three Ridges Area belong to mid 17th century Christians, and French missionaries to the delta estimated that 10% of the population were Christian. *Nam bộ xưa & nay*, 80.

⁸⁵ Shiraishi, “State, Villagers, and Vagabonds: Vietnamese Rural Society and the Phan Bá Vành Rebellion.”

⁸⁶ George E. Dutton, *The Tay Son Uprising: Society and Rebellion in Eighteenth-Century Vietnam* (University of Hawaii Press, 2006), 202–5.

⁸⁷ Nguyễn Văn Trường who was born in Thăng Bình near Đà Nẵng but had emigrated to Gia Định. The other four were all from the Delta: Nguyễn Văn Nhon was from Sa Đéc; Nguyễn Huỳnh Đức was from contemporary now Khánh Hậu; Trương Tấn Bửu was from contemporary Giồng Trôm- Bến Tre, and Lê Văn Duyệt was from the Ba Giồng area near Mỹ Tho. Though not counted among the original Tigers, Võ Tánh’s quasi-independent regiments in Gò Công also rallied to the Nguyễn, further cementing the southern basis of his military power.

⁸⁸ See discussion in Choi Byung Wook, *Southern Vietnam Under the Reign of Minh Mạng (1820-1841): Central Policies and Local Response* (SEAP Publications, 2004), 28.

Chinese financial and merchant groups which stretched from the Mekong Delta and the Siamese littoral into the islands.⁸⁹ At first the Chinese groups' allegiance was ambiguous, but after the above discussed Tây Sơn reprisals against the Biên Hoà merchants, they rallied to Nguyễn Ánh. Also crucial were the technological and tactical innovations contributed by French catholic privateers who rallied to the young prince's aid.⁹⁰ Taken together these three groups-- Mekong high gentry, Christians, and the Chinese-- were pillars of the resurgent Nguyễn state. Surprisingly, they would also act as the foundation for French colonization a half century later. What explains the ostensible betrayal?⁹¹

The path from stalwarts to colonial collaboration can be traced through the alienation these groups received at the hands of Gia Long's successor, Minh Mạng. It was Minh Mạng's confrontation with the legacy of Gia Long's most trusted official, perhaps the Orchard Heartland's most beloved son, Lê Văn Duyệt, which fractured a southern coalition whose privileges he had personally safeguarded against encroachment of the central authority. Duyệt's memory was so treasured, that one of the first independent fundraising campaigns of the southern elite under the Franco-Nguyễn Détente was the 1894 construction and embellishment of his temple, which received a poem of dedication from imperial collaborationist leader Hoàng Cao Khải.⁹² Although some writers have styled the Duyệt cult in anticolonial terms, these point to the inherent instability of national symbols more than any grounded vision of Duyệt's own

⁸⁹ The merchant networks were also vital to the Chakri dynasty consolidation of an absolutist state in Siam. Yumio Sakurai, "Eighteenth-Century Chinese Pioneers on the Water Frontier of Indochina," in *Water Frontier: Commerce and the Chinese in the Lower Mekong Region, 1750-1880*, ed. Li Tana and Nola Cooke (Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, 2004); Li Tana, "Ships and Shipbuilding," in *Water Frontier: Commerce and the Chinese in the Lower Mekong Region, 1750-1880*, ed. Nola Cooke and Li Tana (Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, 2004).

⁹⁰ For example, the completion of the Vauban style citadel in Saigon in 1790 marked the turning point in the war. Whereas the annual spring rice harvest had hitherto welcomed a Tây Sơn offensive which routed the Nguyễn and captured the provisions, after 1790 the citadel proved impregnable, and the Nguyễn gained the initiative. See Frédéric Mantine, "The Transfer of Western Military Technology to Vietnam in the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries: The Case of the Nguyễn," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 34, no. 3 (2003): 530, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463403000468>.

⁹¹ One answer to this question is that "betrayal" is not the appropriate term. Over the course of this dissertation, I will discuss the social background, the worldview, and the political program of the turn of the century South Vietnamese elite. Embarking on this research project, I suspected their anti-Chinese program might be somehow traceable to the plural society formally established as part of the Nguyễn political consolidation at the turn of the 19th Century. What I did not expect, however, was the pride with which these men styled colonial collaboration as consistent with their loyalty to throne. In short, they were nostalgic and fiercely proud of their services to Gia Long, bragged of their contributions to the royal family, and saw French tutelage as a natural and harmonious extension of a three-century long developmentalist project of Nguyễn-led settler colonization. There is doubtless an "invented" dimension to this tradition: a post hoc rationalization of peace and the Nguyễn's own reluctant acceptance of French control—conditions I will call the Franco-Nguyễn Détente.⁹¹ But notwithstanding the relatively late articulation of this worldview, its historical premises aren't fabricated and require some introducing here. Even more so because we are accustomed to view the history of colonization from the viewpoint of resistance, and it is difficult to imagine the concrete native interests to which the initial colonial project was addressed. The idea of the Franco-Nguyễn Détente is expanded upon in chapter 4. Invented tradition is a reference to, Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge University Press, 2012).

⁹² An extended discussion of the temple features in the sections on Lê Văn Duyệt in Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Nam kỳ Phong tục Nhơn vật Diển ca Chú thích* (Nhà xuất bản Văn hoá - Văn nghệ, 2014), 118.

legacy.⁹³ The inverse appears to have been the case, Duyệt's legacy initially functioned to legitimate French interests in the region.

A runt in his youth, Duyệt found his own on the battlefield. His bravery and cunning proved decisive in the battle of Thị Nai in 1801.⁹⁴ He remained a trusted ally of Gia Long, even while other of the Southern generals were killed in courtly intrigue. In 1812-1813, then again from 1820 till his death in 1832, he served as the Viceroy of Gia Định, a feudatory encompassing the whole south of Vietnam and large parts of contemporary Cambodia. He used this power to shield Christians from Huế-led anti-heresy campaigns. His commitment to protecting Christians may have partially been an expression of loyalty to his former comrades in arms, but there is also good reason to believe his Christian commitments were part of an effort to maintain commercial contacts to overseas sources of strategic goods.⁹⁵

His appointment as viceroy also amounted to directorship over immense lumber and rice wealth, which Duyệt took an active role in managing, and which likewise testify to his broadly commercial orientation.⁹⁶ Gia Long intended to maintain the South as a means of obtaining cash and strategic commodities. The system had historically been based on medium and small junks, belonging to Chinese sailors originating in Guangdong or Fujian, and who undertook stints, up to ten years at a time, plying the routes between the Mekong, the gulf of Siam, Singapore and the Islands.⁹⁷ They brought strategic goods, such as iron, tin, sulfur, and arms from Siam, Melaka, and Batavia to Saigon. They also carried rice to the Chinese plantation Kongsì, and from these island outposts they would obtain industrial plant products like gambier, spices, and British opium. Toward the end of their tours they would return to Saigon, where they would have large junks built at what was at the time arguably Southeast Asia's largest and best shipbuilding facility.⁹⁸ They would then fill their new large boats to the brim with rice and Orchard Heartland

⁹³ See the account of Nguyễn An Ninh's revolutionary vows repeated in Tai, *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution*, 76.

⁹⁴ Duyệt was the grandson of a Quảng Ngãi immigrant to the Three Ridges Area just west of Mỹ Tho. He was born in the early 1760s. Although his well-to-do father sent his other sons to study for the official exams, Duyệt wasn't one for books. According to legend, Duyệt's academic failures weren't related to the sort of lazy playboy gregariousness which so often became a stumbling block of new students. Instead, he was something of a loner, who was ruthlessly mocked by his peers because he was born with a deformed penis, and he preferred to spend his days with animals, trapping, fishing, and tending to fighting cocks. When prince Nguyễn Anh's armies passed through the area in a flight from Tay Son in 1781, he was hosted by Duyệt's family. Duyệt's father had little faith in his son. After all, the frivolous boy spent his days "wandering around in torn clothes, climbing trees and consorting with buffalos". So he entrusted the boy to Nguyễn Anh's entourage, where his deformed penis qualified him to be a court eunuch. Duyệt proved his loyalty by protecting the ladies of the palace while Gia Long was seeking aid in Siam, and upon his return, in 1785, Duyệt was promoted to the Privy council. He proved a talented recruiter and military strategist. See the interesting early odes to Duyệt put together by Southern notables: Cao Hải Đễ, *Lê-Văn-Duyệt: Tiểu-Sử* (Imprimerie Jh. Nguyễn Văn Việt, 1924); Lê Văn Phát, *Lê Văn Duyệt: Tả Quân Thượng Công Nam Kỳ Tổng Trấn* (Imprimerie de l'union, 1924).

⁹⁵ See the accounts in Jacob Ramsay, *Mandarins and Martyrs: The Church and the Nguyen Dynasty in Early Nineteenth-Century Vietnam* (Stanford University Press, 2008); Wook, *Southern Vietnam Under the Reign of Minh Mạng (1820-1841)*.

⁹⁶ The praised lavished on him by John White during his broadly unpleasant stay in Saigon is a testament to his reputation with foreign merchants. John White, *A Voyage to Cochín China* (Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, Brown, and Green, 1824).

⁹⁷ Li Tana, "The Late-Eighteenth and Early-Nineteenth Century Mekong Delta in the Regional Trade System," in *Water Frontier: Commerce and the Chinese in the Lower Mekong Region, 1750-1880*, ed. Nola Cooke and Li Tana (Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, 2004).

⁹⁸ White, *A Voyage to Cochín China*, 235; Tana, "Ships and Shipbuilding," 123.

cash crops like betel, and bring it back to China, where they would sell both the commodities and the boat at an astronomical profit. Thus, Mekong rice which was sold for cash, and the Saigon shipbuilding industry, which relied heavily on Chinese and Vietnamese Christians expertise, were at the center of the system. Although both rice and lumber export were officially forbidden, Lê Văn Duyệt's widespread smuggling was tolerated, both to acquire strategic commodities and as recompense for Southern contributions to Gia Long's reconquest. The difference is stark when one compares Tonkin, which Gia Long treated as conquered land to be plundered in support of the capital.⁹⁹

Gia Long's successor Minh Mạng came to power in 1820 and immediately set out to reign in southern privilege. Rice prices had skyrocketed across the kingdom, and widespread dissatisfaction and rebellion in the North brought new scrutiny on the South. The court justifiably suspected southern leaders of smuggling rice abroad for consumer goods and opium.¹⁰⁰ Southern privileges had become a threat to the regime stability, but Lê Văn Duyệt's personal control over the administration prevented transparent accounting from Huế.¹⁰¹ Although there is evidence that both Chinese and Vietnamese were engaging in illicit commerce, the court specifically targeted the Chinese for suppression—prohibiting them from participating in state vessel expeditions or building or purchasing ships.¹⁰²

When Duyệt died in 1831, the feudatory was formalized into a provincial system, allowing Huế to more effectively investigate regional finances. Duyệt's role in timber smuggling was specifically targeted. His grave was desecrated, his legacy proscribed, and his loyalists launched a three-year rebellion. The punishment was severe, more than 1,000 holdouts were publicly executed, Chinese were targeted with assimilationist policies and Christians were hunted and killed in anti-heresy campaigns.¹⁰³

Formalizing the administration strengthened central control over the South, but it did so at great costs. Economically, the Saigon rice-shipbuilding nexus fled to Siam because a large segment of the region's most skilled craftspeople were the Vietnamese Christians and Chinese targeted by the counter insurgency.¹⁰⁴ A significant portion of the remaining Chinese militantly opposed the Nguyễn authority, seen in the fact that fugitive Chinese appeared at the head of periodic 'Khmer' revolts.¹⁰⁵ Minh Mạng also dismantled the Vauban style citadel, which had proved nearly

⁹⁹ See the striking discussion of the economic logic of the Tào Vận system in Li, *A Maritime Vietnam*, 285.

¹⁰⁰ Choi Byung Wook, "The Nguyen Dynasty's Policy toward Chinese on the Water Frontier in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century," in *Water Frontier: Commerce and the Chinese in the Lower Mekong Region, 1750-1880*, ed. Nola Cooke and Li Tana (Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, 2004).

¹⁰¹ For Duyệt's personal control of the ministries, see the discussion in Wook, *Southern Vietnam Under the Reign of Minh Mạng (1820-1841)*, 49.

¹⁰² Wook, "The Nguyen Dynasty's Policy toward Chinese on the Water Frontier in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century," 94.

¹⁰³ Wook, *Southern Vietnam Under the Reign of Minh Mạng (1820-1841)*, 97; Ramsay, *Mandarins and Martyrs*.

¹⁰⁴ Tana, "Ships and Shipbuilding," 129.

¹⁰⁵ Wook provides an anecdote which gives a sense of the ferocity of this campaign. "In 1833, just before the rebels entered Gia Định citadel for the final stand, the royal army swept through the Cholon Chinese settlement in response to the Chinese rebels' attempt to turn the area into a military base. Royal forces killed or captured over one thousand Chinese settlers in Cholon alone and confiscated their property. Any Chinese believed to have participated in the rebellion had his property confiscated and four fingers of his right hand cut off before being exiled even if he had surrendered." The thousand counted here are unrelated to the 1,200 - 1,500 estimated executed *en masse* by being buried alive after the citadel fell two years later. Wook, "The Nguyen Dynasty's Policy toward Chinese on the Water Frontier in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century," 96.

impregnable since its construction in 1790. Not only was this a testament to his lack of faith in Southern loyalty, it also fatally weakened the point of successful French colonial intervention. One could imagine a counterfactual, where Minh Mang charted a middle path toward suppressing southern privileges which granted sufficient venal autonomy to local powerbrokers to ensure their allegiance, and which didn't indulge in the bloody anti-Christian pogroms which became the *casus belli* of French colonial intervention.

French motivations were only superficially Christian. It would take us too far afield to disentangle the mix of religious, naval, and business interests encouraging colonization, but the conquest of the Indochina was from the start colored by a mix of geopolitical and economic interests.¹⁰⁶ By the annexation of western Cochinchina in 1866, Vietnamese Christians and Chinese merchants had become the political and fiscal pillars of the southern colony.

For the Christians, there were practical reasons beyond simple French preference for coreligionists.¹⁰⁷ For one, the naval officers who initially governed the territory relied heavily on French missionaries—the only men with any knowledge of the country. A second factor was *quốc ngữ* -- the Latin script familiar today, which was initially developed as an expedient for evangelical work, and was only familiar to Vietnamese Christians. The Nguyễn administration fled *en masse* from the zones of French control in the South, forcing the colonial forces to cobble together an administrative apparatus *ex nihilo*. The French depended upon the Christians, eventually raising *quốc ngữ* to an official administrative script, starting a process which culminated in its widespread popular adoption. Windfall opportunities for advancement and venality fell in the lap of this historically marginalized and justifiably vindictive group. There was no shortage of administrators ready to express frustrations at the poor quality of their subordinates, and to compare them unfavorably with the Confucian mandarins they had replaced. But such complaints should not distract from the fact that there was a core group of truly talented Vietnamese Christian adjuncts who rendered vital service to the early colony. This Christian high elite was distinct from the Orchard Heartland gentry which concerns the bulk of this dissertation, and which only later accommodated to the colonial presence. It was the core Christian group which played an outsized role in the initial years, their marriage networks ramified widely throughout the colony, and figures associated with them will appear throughout the chapters that follow.¹⁰⁸

Regarding the work of these native administrators, an important aspect of it was acting as an intermediary for a colonial state building strategy which relied on simple compulsion. Export rice was far and away the colony's most important product, and the French quickly set about transforming and privatizing land, draining swamps, building roads, and granting vast land concessions to whichever allies they thought able to bring it into cultivation. Much of the labor power needed for their vast infrastructure projects was acquired by force—instituting a widely hated system of *corvée* as a substitute for taxes in kind. Holding village notables liable for collection of payments effectively made village leaders into forced labor recruiters for French infrastructure projects, since the poorer residents couldn't pay taxes in cash, they proved a large, if not always trustworthy, source of exploitable labor.

¹⁰⁶ See: Pierre Brocheux and Daniel Hémery, *Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization, 1858-1954* (Univ of California Press, 2011), 17; Christopher Goscha, *Vietnam: A New History* (Basic Books, 2016), 57.

¹⁰⁷ Osborne, *The French Presence in Cochinchina and Cambodia: Rule and Response (1859-1905)*, 59.

¹⁰⁸ See chapters three, four, and nine of this dissertation.

But the state couldn't survive on forced labor alone, cash was needed for salaries and payments of various kinds. The land tax was never sufficient to defray the costs of even the local budgets, so a 'triple-headed monster of monopolies' was developed: opium, alcohol, and salt.¹⁰⁹ Of these, opium was initially the most important. A farm system was first introduced in 1861, but French attempts to control and profit from it were constantly frustrated by the highly effective Chinese sabotage and smuggling. After 1865, the concession was grudgingly offered to Chinese bidding, but French colons and administrators alike were never satisfied with the arrangement. French fiscal reliance on the Chinese, like their political reliance on Christians, was thus conditioned by their administrative weakness. Unlike in the case of Christians, however, the colonial state didn't need to engineer a taxation apparatus out of whole cloth.¹¹⁰ As in neighboring Southeast Asian colonies, the French adapted to the existing network of Chinese cartels, which maintained their own private coercive apparatus and who alone had the intelligence infrastructure to effectively police the hinterland.¹¹¹ Revenue-farming -- sale of contracts of tax collection to Chinese cartels -- was the dominant form of state revenue generation throughout the region. But such a mercenary form of revenue generation could only be transitory, by funding state consolidation and bureaucratic growth, the fiscal needs of the state increase while actual profits of the farms decrease.¹¹² The subsequent two decades were characterized by constant haggling over the terms of the contracts. For the Chinese businessmen, the opium farm was a financial pillar of the rice trade, which anchored their increasingly diversified and transregional business empires, stretching not only into other monopolies, but also into other colonies and other whole sectors.¹¹³ For the French, not only was Chinese control a constraint on the colonial budget, it was challenge to their right as conquerors.

The Indochinese Moment

Cochinchinese Vietnamese commercial nationalism arose from two crises which converged at the end of the nineteenth century. The first was political. Over the course of the 1880s and 1890s, Nguyễn-led armed resistance to colonization had exhausted itself. To suppress the wide ranging Save the King Revolt (1885-1895), the French relied to an unprecedented degree on native riflemen and collaborationist mandarins. Delegating the counterinsurgency to Vietnamese led to a reevaluation of colonial philosophy which henceforth recognized the legitimate and organic authority of native elite and saw them as necessary intermediaries of the civilizing mission.¹¹⁴ The first years of the 1890s saw the mandarinat respond to these calls, and by mid-decade they had largely defected to French protection. The French leadership showed a surprisingly far-reaching willingness to delegate authority to native leaders to secure their allegiance. Though effectively abandoned once the threat of insurgency had passed, the promise of a renewal

¹⁰⁹ Hakiem Nankoe et al., "The Origins of the Opium Trade and the Opium Regie in Colonial Indochina," in *The Rise and Fall of Revenue Farming: Business Elites and the Emergence of the Modern State in Southeast Asia*, ed. Howard Dick and John Butcher (Springer, 1993), 183.

¹¹⁰ Goscha, *Vietnam*, 78.

¹¹¹ For a region-wide view see Part 1 of Howard Dick and John Butcher, *The Rise and Fall of Revenue Farming: Business Elites and the Emergence of the Modern State in Southeast Asia* (Springer, 1993).

¹¹² Nankoe et al., "The Origins of the Opium Trade and the Opium Regie in Colonial Indochina"; Sasges, "Scaling the Commanding Heights"; Carl A. Trocki, "The Internationalization of Chinese Revenue Farming Networks," in *Water Frontier: Commerce and the Chinese in the Lower Mekong Region, 1750-1880*, ed. Nola Cooke and Li Tana (Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, 2004).

¹¹³ Trocki, "The Internationalization of Chinese Revenue Farming Networks."

¹¹⁴ See the account in Brocheux and Hémery, *Indochina*, 61–63.

mandarin prerogatives, native command of militia units, and the reversal of the separation of Annam and Tonkin, secured timely and much needed allegiance from the imperial court.¹¹⁵ I've termed this the Franco-Nguyễn Détente, and it reached its height during the reign of Thành Thái (1889-1907). The importance of this détente is straightforward for the installation and evolution of the protectorates in Annam and Tonkin, however less attention has been paid to the role it played in Cochinchinese politics. Subsequent chapters of this dissertation will make the case that the détente was vital to securing the accommodation of Orchard Heartland elites who had previously responded the colonial conquest with either loyalist resistance or Confucian gentlemanly reclusion.

The second crisis was fiscal and concerned the revenue-farm regime described in the preceding pages. Subjectively, decades of haggling between French administrators and Chinese cartels over the terms of the opium contracts had fostered a belief that farm system starved the colonial treasury and entrenched Chinese commercial dominance at the expense of both French *colons* and Vietnamese producers.¹¹⁶ The crisis had several characteristics. Demand for opium outpaced the capacity for provision, which fostered a lively black-market trade.¹¹⁷ The widespread smuggling undermined revenue by lowering sale volume while also constraining the ability of the administration to fix prices. The farms were becoming less profitable, and thus riskier for entrepreneurs, even as the available capital, and thus the size of bids, skyrocketed.¹¹⁸ Colonial states with ballooning bureaucracies and increasingly large public works projects required greater revenue and attempted to bundle farms. Yet, because the Chinese cartels were regional rather than localized to any specific colony, smuggling between colonies was a relatively easy and effective means to undermine rivals who were competing to consolidate revenue farms spanning from the Straits Settlements to Hong Kong.¹¹⁹ If outbid, one could bankrupt a rival by dumping cheap contraband opium, a commonplace scenario which ended the opium farm in Siam.¹²⁰ In Indochina, this competition between Chinese cartels broke into violent turf wars

¹¹⁵ De Lanessan, Minister of the Marine-cum-colonial theorist was the mastermind of the policy. Brocheux and Hemery argue his policies “were relatively audacious. They constituted, without a doubt, the inception of the most advanced policy that France had ever practiced in Indochina, tolerated as long as it concerned only the pacification of the Can Vuong, then quickly denounced and aborted with de Lanessan’s dismissal in December 1894. These ideas inaugurated a tradition, which would remain in the minority, of ‘liberal’ colonization founded more or less confusedly on the long-term acceptance of a possible shift in the colonial relationship toward a gradual decolonization and on the will to modernize indigenous societies. Built on recognition of the existence of the Vietnamese nation, de Lanessan’s policy saw the protectorate as the creation of a genuine and lasting historical compromise between French Imperialism, the conservative national elite, and the monarchy.”

Brocheux and Hémery, *Indochina*, 75; Jean Louis de Lanessan, *La Colonisation Française En Indochine* (Baillière, 1895); Jean-Louis de Lanessan, *La lutte pour l'existence et l'évolution des sociétés* (Alcan, 1903).

¹¹⁶ Nankoe et al., “The Origins of the Opium Trade and the Opium Regie in Colonial Indochina,” 187–91.

¹¹⁷ Sasges reports that “In 1880, for example, the state’s representative with the farm calculated that in November the sales of contraband opium in Cholon were approximately 80 per cent of legal sales.” See Sasges, “Scaling the Commanding Heights,” 1498.; See also Nankoe et al., “The Origins of the Opium Trade and the Opium Regie in Colonial Indochina,” 188.

¹¹⁸ Carl A. Trocki, *Opium and Empire: Chinese Society in Colonial Singapore, 1800-1910* (Cornell University Press, 2019), 183.

¹¹⁹ Trocki, “The Internationalization of Chinese Revenue Farming Networks.”

¹²⁰ Ian Brown, “The End of the Opium Farm in Siam, 1905-7,” in *The Rise and Fall of Revenue Farming: Business Elites and the Emergence of the Modern State in Southeast Asia*, ed. Howard Dick and John Butcher (Springer, 1993).

between so-called “secret society” mafia organizations.¹²¹ The revenue farms had become inefficient and a security threat, even while they became less and less attractive to Chinese cartels supposed to buy them. When a Cochinchina- Cambodia super farm was offered in 1881, it didn’t attract a single bid. By the end of the century, the feeling was mutual: the state dismantled tax farms starting in 1882, gradually absorbing the farms’ commercial networks and coercive mechanisms into the new Department of Customs and Régies, which soon became the largest branch of the civilian administration.

A definitive resolution of the fiscal crisis began with the tenure of Governor General Paul Doumer (1897-1902) who instituted a thoroughgoing reform program which balanced the budget, centralized and rationalized the administration, and embarked on an ambitious economic development program lead by large public works.¹²² The most important dimension of his initiatives was a series of bond issuances which funded the construction of large infrastructure projects, while simultaneously decreasing the colony’s fiscal reliance on Chinese enterprises and providing the maneuvering room needed to dismantle and formally incorporate them into the state. Importantly, the investments arising from these major works projects injected unprecedented revenue into local Indochinese firms, promoting an accumulation regime wherein profits were closely tied to the winning of state contracts, and thus cushy relations between businessmen and the officials.¹²³ Gerard Sages has aptly termed this new era of cooperation between colonial bureaucrats and local entrepreneurs the “Indochinese Moment,” and has shown that it simultaneously spurred entrepreneurship among administrators and brought unprecedented scrutiny onto Chinese activities in the colony. Sages was speaking of the French *colons*, but a parallel process took place among the Vietnamese. In the Mekong Delta, the growth of public works included major roadbuilding and canal dredging projects which triggered a speculative land boom that brought unprecedented opportunities for capital accumulation among the old rural Vietnamese elite. As will be shown across subsequent chapters, the ubiquitous calls for Vietnamese to embrace “big business” [*đại thương*] were only rarely to innovate new products or production techniques in the familiar Schumpeterian sense, rather they were more often calls to mobilize gentry capital to bids for lucrative state contracts.¹²⁴

¹²¹ Nola Cooke, “The Heaven and Earth Society Upsurge in Early 1880s French Cochinchina,” *Chinese Southern Diaspora Studies* 4 (2010).

¹²² This and previous paragraph are drawn from Sages, “Scaling the Commanding Heights,” 1497–503.

¹²³ My thinking on this conjuncture has been informed by the French Regulation School, which distinguishes between a *regime of accumulation* — the relatively stable pattern through which surplus is generated, distributed, and reinvested across an economy — and a *mode of regulation* — the ensemble of institutions, norms, and political compromises that temporarily stabilize that pattern. See Boyer, *Political Economy of Capitalisms* especially chapters two and three. Michel Aglietta, *A Theory of Capitalist Regulation: The US Experience* (Verso Books, 2016). In the Cochinchinese case, Doumer’s reforms inaugurated a new regime of accumulation in which profit-making was closely tied to state bond issuances and public works contracts — a form approximating what Dylan Riley and Robert Brenner have recently termed “political capitalism,” wherein returns on investment are substantially mediated by political access rather than productive innovation. See “Dylan Riley & Robert Brenner, The Long Downturn and Its Political Results, NLR 155, September–October 2025,” accessed March 23, 2026, <https://newleftreview.org/issues/ii155/articles/dylan-riley-robert-brenner-the-long-downturn-and-its-political-results>. The Vietnamese business movement examined in subsequent chapters represents a complimentary variant of this logic: an attempt by the Orchard Heartland Gentry to participate in the politically mediated accumulation regime from which they had been largely excluded. The institutions through which various stakeholders competed to stabilize and redirect this regime — electoral councils, the press, commercial associations, and the business enterprises themselves — constitute the contested mode of regulation of the Indochinese Moment.

¹²⁴ See chapters three, four and five of this dissertation.

Four institutional developments consolidated this new regime. First, as mentioned above, the French stamped out the last vestiges of Nguyễn resistance, and a Franco-Nguyễn Détente took shape. The Détente channeled political conflict from armed confrontation into institutional accommodation, not necessarily by reducing grievances among the population at large, but rather by constricting the field of political elites willing to channel popular grievances into direct confrontation with the colonial project.

Second, a generation of republican-minded French statesmen built a governing apparatus in Cochinchina. The martial law of the admirals was replaced by a civilian regime in 1879. Cochinchina, a full colony governed under French law — unlike the "protectorates" nominally ruled by the Nguyễn in central Annam and northern Tonkin — received parliamentary representation in Paris. A host of elected offices were installed in every province and municipality across the South, which, though toothless against the colonial administration's chief executives, nonetheless had important budgetary functions.¹²⁵ The Cochinchina Chamber of Commerce was founded in 1868, the Municipal Council of Saigon in 1877, the Colonial Council of Cochinchina established in 1880, the Provincial Councils of Cochinchina in 1889, and the Chamber of Agriculture in 1897. These elected councils, which all had a minority indigenous membership kept small to ensure French domination, nonetheless performed a mix of deliberative and consultative functions, and exerted important influence over the funding of public works projects. Their very existence encouraged electoral politicking, and, until the electoral reforms of 1922, native members were elected by a form of restricted suffrage that surprisingly favored the village notables and canton chiefs of the Orchard Heartland at the expense of ministerial clerks. These institutions regulated competition over state resources, giving indigenous councilors a modicum of influence over the allocation of the lucrative public works budgets and land concessions.

Third, a critical mass of Vietnamese, born between 1860 and 1880, had by the end of the century passed through the Franco-Annamite schools, achieving, in the words of one historian, the "qualified triumph" of the Latin script.¹²⁶ By the turn of the century, the demotic script had been irrevocably eclipsed as the principal means of written communication. This had important ideological implications, which will be explored in subsequent chapters. Crucial here is that this was the first generation of mass media, and it saw the foundation of the first privately owned and Vietnamese-managed newspapers.¹²⁷ *The South* [*Nam Kỳ*] was founded in 1897 and lasted one year. *Phan Yên News* [*Phan Yên báo*] debuted before *Talking Business* but lasted only two months. These two brief experiments were followed by the region's most successful papers: *Talking Business Over Tea* [*Nông Cổ Mìn Đàm*] ran from 1901 to 1924, and *Six Provinces News* [*Lục Tỉnh Tân Văn*] from 1907 to 1944. This Vietnamese-language press should be seen as a complement to the new electoral offices, creating a discursive infrastructure through which the new commercial and political possibilities of the Indochinese Moment could be articulated to a reading public.

Together, these developments — the Détente, the councils, the fiscal transformation, the press — formed an interlocking institutional architecture. None was designed to empower Vietnamese

¹²⁵ For a helpful table, see Appendix 3 in Brocheux and Hémery, *Indochina*, 385.

¹²⁶ Osborne, *The French Presence in Cochinchina and Cambodia: Rule and Response (1859-1905)*, 156.

¹²⁷ Important information and snippets from these early newspapers have been collected in chapter 7 of Nguyễn Văn Trung, *Hồ Sơ về Lục Châu Học - Tìm Hiểu Con Người ở Vùng Đất Mới* (Nhà Xuất Bản Trẻ, 2015). Available here <http://nguyenvantrung.free.fr/lucchauhoc/>

enterprise; each served colonial purposes first. But in combination, they created conditions under which the old Orchard Heartland gentry could organize, accumulate, and articulate a political program for the first time since the conquest. The Indochinese Moment was not a chiefly Vietnamese affair. Multiple groups scrambled to exploit the recomposed terrain. French *colons* maneuvered to capture the new institutions for settler interests, giving birth to some of the most successful Indochinese conglomerates.¹²⁸ The Chinese *congrégations*, adapted by further diversifying into rice milling, real estate, and intercolonial banking, retaining their commercial preeminence even as the fiscal basis of their power shifted.¹²⁹ Subsequent chapters will show, the Vietnamese response sought to stitch together an elite bloc composed of the Orchard Heartland gentry and the Saigon bureaucratic elite, and explicitly articulated against the Chinese commercial intermediaries rather than against the colonial condition as such. The business movement that coalesced around *Talking Business* and *Six Provinces News* was one of several competing strategies for navigating the new conjuncture. Its character was neither determined by the structural conditions, nor was it a reflection of some primordial social cleavage, but rather it was a strategic attempt to fashion a durable institutional arrangement which could entrench this Vietnamese elite bloc's place in a new accumulation regime.

Conclusion

This chapter has traced a *longue durée* arc through three centuries of Mekong Delta history. It began with the physical landscape itself — the ancient beach ridges, the seasonal flooding, the goldilocks zone between salt intrusion and inundation that made the Orchard Heartland the most desirable site for Vietnamese agricultural colonization. It followed the making of the Nguyễn "Water Frontier," showing how the commercial dynamism of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries drew Chinese, Vietnamese, and other settlers into the delta and established a plural-society structure featuring a Vietnamese gentry and Chinese merchants which proved remarkably durable across political upheavals. It then traced the fracture of this coalition under Minh Mạng's centralizing reforms: the desecration of Lê Văn Duyệt's legacy, the flight of the Saigon shipbuilding industry to Siam, the anti-Christian pogroms that furnished the French their *casus belli*, and the conditions under which the constituent elements of the old Nguyễn coalition — each alienated from the court in its own way — accommodated the colonial conquest. Finally, it described the turn-of-the-century conjuncture I have called, following Sasges, the Indochinese Moment: the collapse of the extractive revenue-farm regime and the construction of a new fiscal and institutional apparatus that opened political and economic space for Vietnamese self-organization.

The argument advanced in these pages is that the anti-Chinese commercial nationalism which dominated Cochinchinese elite politics in the first decades of the twentieth century was neither a

¹²⁸ Sasges, "Scaling the Commanding Heights"; Gerard Sasges, *Imperial Intoxication: Alcohol and the Making of Colonial Indochina* (University of Hawaii Press, 2017); Gilles de Gantès, "Coloniaux, Gouverneurs et Ministres. L'influence Des Français Du Viet-Nam Sur l'évolution Du Pays à l'époque Coloniale 1902-1914" (Thèse de Doctorat, Académie de Paris Université de Paris VII Denis Diderot, 1994); Gilles de Gantès, "Le particularisme des milieux d'affaires cochinchinois (1860-1910) : comment intégrer un comptoir asiatique à un empire colonial protégé," *Publications de la Société française d'histoire des outre-mers* 6, no. 1 (2008): 735–54.

¹²⁹ See for example the story of Ly Dang in Chapter 4 of Tracy Christianne Barrett, *Transnational Webs: Overseas Chinese Economic and Political Networks in Colonial Vietnam, 1870-1945* (Cornell University, 2007); Anh Sy Huy Le, "'Taming the Intractable': Chinese Migrants, Inter-Asian Interactions, and the Transformation of French Rule in Colonial Vietnam, 1862-1940" (Dissertation, Michigan State University, 2021).

spontaneous eruption of national feeling, nor an imitation of external models imported by exilic literati. It was a structural response to a specific transformation in the colonial political and fiscal conditions which opened the space for Vietnamese elite to renegotiate their privileges in the colonial arrangement. The business movement that coalesced around *Talking Business* and the later Reform Movement enterprises represented one of several competing strategies for navigating this recomposed terrain, and its distinctive character was shaped by the ecological, social, and economic conditions this chapter has described.

The remaining chapters of Part 1 turn from political economy to social history and intellectual reconstruction. Chapter 3 develops a prosopographic portrait of the Orchard Heartland Gentry as they appear in one of the era's richest and most neglected source — Nguyễn Liên Phong's 1909 gazetteer *Figures and Folkways of the South* and his 1915 biographical dictionary *Verses of Homage*. By tabulating the demographics and mapping the social networks of several hundred individuals, I challenge the view of this elite as deracinated parvenus and establish their deep roots in the Mekong Delta landscape described in the preceding pages. Chapter 4 then reconstructs the worldview that these men carried into the Indochinese Moment, an uneasy but genuine effort to reconcile traditional loyalties with the promises of colonial modernity.

Nguyễn Liên Phong and Colonial Cochinchina's Confucian Gentry

The Cochinchinese elite as a historiographical problem

Previous chapters argued that the orthodox portrait of the southern elite as collaborationist, deracinated, and dependent on French favor, rests on a narrow empirical foundation. This chapter revises that depiction by analyzing two seldom-consulted sources: a verse gazetteer Nguyễn Liên Phong wrote in 1909 and a biographical dictionary he wrote in 1915. Against the orthodox account, which traces a linear development from mid-nineteenth century colonial collaborators to the mid-twentieth century Cochinchinese bureaucrats, I argue that previously hesitant Mekong Delta gentry clans rallied into the ranks of the colonial elite at the turn of the century. Their entry split the elite into factions. A small number of nineteenth-century collaborator clans continued to exert influence through their proximity to colonial officials, but they sat above two larger factions that dominated Cochinchinese politics before the 1920s: the colonial clerks drawn from the eastern Gia Định Plateau, and the rural local gentry based in the middle Mekong Delta provinces I have called the Orchard Heartland.

This chapter extends R.B. Smith's important 1972 essay "The Vietnamese Élite of French Cochinchina, 1943," though I revise his findings.¹³⁰ Smith analyzed the 1943 French biographical handbook *Souverains et notabilités d'Indochine*, identifying 141 Cochinchinese Vietnamese which he tabulated in terms of their education, professions, and property.¹³¹ He argues that the elite were urban, French-educated, and dependent on colonial-state employment rather than economic success. From this, Smith concludes that the colonial state substituted for the precolonial imperial system by binding elite access to educational attainment.¹³²

Smith was frank about the limits of his analysis and identified two shortcomings. First, *Souverains et notabilités d'Indochine* is a French colonial state publication compiling biographical information on living individuals from across Indochina, including Cambodia and Laos. It catalogues the colony's most loyal subjects rather than offering a Cochinchinese elite self-evaluation. Smith glosses this problem by characterizing his figures as an "élite within an élite" and "a fair cross-section of the people in the Vietnamese élite whose loyalty to France was (or was believed to be) beyond question."¹³³ Put more directly, Smith's study captures colonial officials' perspective rather than that of Cochinchinese Vietnamese.

His study's second shortcoming follows from the first. Smith ignores regional elites holding local rural office. He concedes the problem, acknowledging they constituted a local oligarchy less reliant on colonial-state support and educational attainment, the very factors he identified as determinative. Smith speculates that it "would perhaps be best to regard them as the top level of an élite of a different kind from the French-educated élite whose life centred upon Saigon and the

¹³⁰ Smith, "The Vietnamese Élite of French Cochinchina, 1943."

¹³¹ *Souverains et notabilités d'Indochine* (Editions du Gouvernement Général de l'Indochine, 1943).

¹³² "In the fields of general administration and military service, the French did no more than create in Viet-Nam their own versions of something that had existed in pre-French society. Those men who entered the former, in particular, did no more than substitute for the traditional education of a Confucian scholar some measure of French general education, on the whole of a more elementary kind." Smith, "The Vietnamese Élite of French Cochinchina, 1943," 468.

¹³³ Smith, "The Vietnamese Élite of French Cochinchina, 1943," 461, 464.

main towns.” But he hesitates because “there were sometimes family relations between” the absent rural elites and the urban elite he profiled.¹³⁴ But Smith’s sources preclude further investigation.

In this chapter, I apply prosopographical analysis to two underutilized sources to extend and correct Smith’s account in three ways. First, the sources avoid Franco-centric framing: the Cochinchinese Vietnamese elite produced them for itself rather than for the colonial state and foreign consumption. Second, they appeared in the first decade of the twentieth century and therefore address a historiographical gap between Osborne’s profile of the immature nineteenth-century colonial elite and Smith’s profile of the mature interwar colony. Third, the sources address regional characteristics and adopt a geographic and historical frame. They therefore reach the rural canton chiefs Smith left invisible. In what follows, I analyze the form and content of these texts to examine early Cochinchinese elite print capitalism, the networks of turn-of-the-century Confucian gentility, the subregions and career pathways that defined the turn-of-the-century elite, and the kinship that bound their most powerful clans together. First, I introduce the two sources.

Introducing the Sources

This chapter profiles the elite’s career paths and geographic distribution by examining two seldom-consulted sources: itinerant historian and geographer Nguyễn Liên Phong’s 6,750-line verse gazetteer *Ballad for the Figures and Folkways of the South* (1909) and his 228-entry biographical dictionary *Verses of Homage for Those Past and Present* (1915). My chief finding is that the southern colonial elite was older than depicted by the orthodox account of Osborne and Smith. Nguyễn Liên Phong and his fellow commentators praised local notables for personal virtue, governing talent, and business acumen, but he also praised them for continuity with the precolonial sphere of Confucian gentility — the network of classically-educated officeholders, examination graduates, and retired scholars bound by shared canon and ritual practice — rather than for dedication to the French civilizing mission. Collaboration thrived under the Franco-Nguyễn Détente because anti-colonial resistance had lost its aura of royal fealty, and many erstwhile “anticolonial” figures developed personal and professional ties with colonial collaborators. Serving two sovereigns, an absurd mockery of Confucian aristocratic ethics in normal times, typified elite loyalty during the first two decades of the twentieth century.

These texts also describe to the broader constituency behind the newspaper *Talking Business* [*Nông Cổ Mìn Đàm*], which I profile in chapter five. Nguyễn Liên Phong, contributed articles within months of the paper’s debut, including heptasyllabic regulated-verse poems that congratulated the editors and supported their program of pooling capital for business ventures.¹³⁵ Later, Nguyễn Liên Phong contributed a translation of a passage from Han dynastic history. By November he had begun submitting original 6/8-meter verse articles that recounted local folklore and explained toponyms, content that anticipated material appearing later in *Figures and Folkways*.¹³⁶ He continued to write for the paper across the decade, and by 1906 the masthead listed him as a regular correspondent [*phụ diễn*]. While researching and writing *Figures and*

¹³⁴ Smith, “The Vietnamese Élite of French Cochinchina, 1943,” 171.

¹³⁵ He was in good company, many individuals who would go on to have important literary careers submitted poems. Such as Nguyễn Khắc Huê, and Đặng Thúc Liêng. See: “Lời kính tặng ông chủ nhật-trình ‘Nông cổ mìn đàm,’” NCMD 9, 26 Sept 1901.

¹³⁶ Nàng Đề-hoanh dung thơ cứu cha, NCMD # 10, 3 Oct 1901; Chuyện Thủ Huồng, NCMD # 16, 14 Nov 1901

Folkways, Nguyễn Liên Phong contributed to *Talking Business's* ideological project. He lived as a Confucian gentleman-recluse. Local notables hosted his travels around the colony in exchange for medicinal consulting, calligraphy, or music and poetry readings.¹³⁷ He drew on the experiences of those travels to write *Figures and Folkways* and *Verses of Homage*. The two books document the newspaper's broader gentry constituency.

Sources on Nguyễn Liên Phong's life are scarce; the Vietnamese historian Cao Tự Thanh has assembled the most plausible account in his annotated edition of *Figures and Folkways*.¹³⁸ Nguyễn Liên Phong was born in central Vietnam's Bình Định Province in the mid-1840s. Nguyễn Liên Phong included an admirer's poem in the appendix that reads "Bình Định a land of heroes, Nguyễn Liên Phong an extraordinary talent," which I take as Nguyễn Liên Phong's own confirmation of his Bình Định origins. Obituaries for Nguyễn Liên Phong in *Talking Business* and the Saigon paper South Central Daily [*Nam trung nhật báo*] in June 1917 corroborate this, mourning the passing of the "vagabond old teacher" [lão sư giang hồ] and musician from Bình Định who died at his home in Tân Định, Saigon, at "just over 70 years of age." Reading this as between 71 and 75 places his birth between 1843 and 1847.

A passage in *Verses of Homage* shows that Nguyễn Liên Phong left Annam for French Cochinchina by the 1880s. He records sharing traditional medicinal recipes with the early collaborator Trần Bá Hựu. He must therefore have reached Cochinchina before 1885, when Trần Bá Hựu was killed by anti-French rebels. Although Nguyễn Liên Phong earned the nickname "vagabond" from his travels across the Delta, he appears to have been based in Bến Tre, the same province as *Talking Business's* founding chief editor Lương Khắc Ninh and several other figures central to the early vernacular public sphere in Cochinchina. Emperor Duy Tân provides this information: in 1912 he awarded Nguyễn Liên Phong the *kim khánh* — a medallion the Nguyễn court conferred on subjects whose service or scholarship merited imperial recognition — and described him as "a man from the central region who has long lived in Bến Tre," honoring *Figures and Folkways* for its contribution to Vietnamese literature. The award testifies to the text's circulation and reception among elites in both Cochinchina and Annam.¹³⁹ The front matter of both *Figures and Folkways* and *Verses of Homage* lists Nguyễn Liên Phong as living in the Tân Định neighborhood of Saigon, and his preface to *Verses of Homage* regrets that he could no longer make research trips to the far west. He likely settled in Saigon during the first decade of the twentieth century and remained there until his death in 1917.

A window onto the birth of Vietnamese print capitalism

Although Nguyễn Liên Phong drew *Figures and Folkways* heavily from his travels through the colony as a correspondent for *Talking Business*, the local gentry's support and the patronage of the first Vietnamese print capitalist, Đinh Thái Sơn, made publication possible. The preface narrates a drafting and publication timeline that emphasizes these patrons.

February 22, 1902,

¹³⁷ My notion of performance of gentlemanly identity is taken from Zachary Berge-Becker, "Arts, Leisure, and the Construction of 'Gentlemanly' (Shi 士) Identities in 7th–14th Century China" (Columbia University, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.7916/obj7-bj70>.

¹³⁸ Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Nam kỳ Phong tục Nhơn vật Diển ca Chú thích*.

¹³⁹ Kim Khanh is a gold broach signifying official recognition of meritorious conduct. Cited in Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Nam kỳ Phong tục Nhơn vật Diển ca Chú thích*, 13, as "tờ tâu của Phủ Phụ chính 27,6 Duy Tân thứ 5, Châu bản triều Nguyễn, tltqg 1 DT5, 181-182/30"

Unoccupied, I let my pen dance.
I travelled the hills and valleys of the South's Six Provinces
To meet the figures from all over.
Gracious for fraternity spanning the four seas,
Which bore the costs and aided my travel.
For over a year I drafted these pages,
Into a book uniting districts near and far.¹⁴⁰

Nguyễn Liên Phong contributed his first verse geographies to *Talking Business* in October 1901, and the success of those submissions may have prompted him to undertake a larger project. *Talking Business* did not fund it; instead, in his words, the “fraternity spanning the four seas which bore the costs and aided my travel” [On tứ hải huynh đệ điều độ, giúp hành trình phí lộ kim ngân] bore the costs and aided his travel. Throughout the text Nguyễn Liên Phong details this help, praising “figures from all over” [nhon vật đủ miền mọi chỗ] for their gentlemanly hobbies, good tea, good wine, good poetry, genteel reputations, and large well-ordered estates. He gives the impression of an itinerant scholar travelling village to village preparing medicine, lending advice, playing music, and composing parallel verses for shrines and homes, hosted everywhere by patricians of the villages and provincial towns who shared his love for the old culture.

Gentry patronage proved necessary because, despite initial gestures toward colonial state funding, Đinh Thái Sơn and his publishing company Phát Toán bore the print costs. On October 17, 1902, Governor of Cochinchina De Lamothe announced an open competition for *quốc ngữ* geographic and literary works for the Franco-Annamite education system. On May 25, 1903, the colonial administration convened a panel of judges to determine the winners. On February 15, 1904, the panel circulated a list of sixteen titles permitted for publication among the provincial administrators; *Figures and Folkways* was one of them.¹⁴¹ This timeline matches Nguyễn Liên Phong's own terse account: he began in February 1902 and “gradually wrote for just over a year” [Hơn năm dư chép thảo lần lần].

Whether Nguyễn Liên Phong knew about the competition in advance and began research in anticipation, or, more likely, adapted his ongoing work for *Talking Business* to the newly announced competition, the competition and the implied promise of state funding moved him to consolidate his scattered writings into a single book. The 1909 publication date shows that the text then languished unpublished for more than five years. Nguyễn Liên Phong's preface again addresses this delay: “A panel was convened to judge its merits; the manuscript was accepted but was long left unprinted. Đinh Thái Sơn's heart full of fondness and faith, bore the costs of printing in an act of great service.” [*Giám khảo xem tường trong đục, Lấy đậu rồi mấy lúc chưa in. Đinh Thái Sơn có dạ thương tin, Chịu hao tổn án hành dài hậu*].¹⁴² Nguyễn Liên Phong continued to update the text, even as he sought in vain to procure funding from both the Governor of Cochinchina and the Colonial Council.¹⁴³ Turned down, Đinh Thái Sơn and Nguyễn

¹⁴⁰ *Figures and Folkways*, p45

¹⁴¹ *Bulletin du Secrétariat du gouvernement de la Cochinchine* 1904, tr 17-18.

¹⁴² *Figures and Folkways* p46-47

¹⁴³ Further clues allow us to infer a particular timeline of its editing and publication. Another text published by Đinh Thái Sơn, a *quốc ngữ* translation of the 19th century folktale, Thạch Sanh Lý Thông by Đặng Lễ Nghi in 1907, contains an advertisement for the upcoming translation of *Figures and Folkways*. Information within *Figures and Folkways* also implies that it was largely completed by this date, for example lines 197-198 name Thành Thái as the

Liên Phong pushed forward without state aid and published the work independently, almost certainly at a loss given the original advertisement of *Figures and Folkways* as educational material for colonial elementary schools, a text meant to instill basic familiarity with local and regional historical figures.

As I show below, the text places contemporary Cochinchinese colonial notables in a historical narrative of expanding civilization that links the earliest Vietnamese settlement of the South to the current colonial project's development goals. Phát Toán typically published popular folktales, translations of Chinese novels, and poems; *Figures and Folkways* was unlikely to reach the same audience. Its chief audience may instead have been the “figures” themselves. The book served as an ideological effort the Cochinchinese gentry made on its own behalf, asserting their place under the Franco-Nguyễn D tente and registering their contributions to the colonial society then taking shape. The endorsement signatures bear out this reading: they cluster in occupational groupings I detail below, including Saigonese clerks, Catholic notables, capitalists, musicians, Orchard Heartland gentry, and Annamese gentlemanly recluses.

This audience targeting also explains why the text devotes substantial attention to Đinh Thái Sơn, its most active supporter and the man who bore the bulk of its printing costs. Beyond his role in *Figures and Folkways*, his company Phát Toán took over printing Talking Business around 1910, tying his rise to the central organ of the early vernacular public sphere. The rags-to-riches story of Vietnam's first print capitalist documents a segment of the antebellum elite I want to highlight: descendants of Catholic colonial partisans who leveraged their connections to figures, religious institutions, and state industries to launch business careers. Đinh Thái Sơn was born in Nghệ An to a Christian family of Nguyễn military officials.¹⁴⁴ The Catholic political adventurer and colonial provocateur Lê Bá Đ nh brought him to Cochinchina. While working as an interpreter at the French consulate in Haiphong, Lê Bá Đ nh had twice tried to provoke a French invasion of Tonkin to “introduce its civilization” and free its residents from the “unjust and burdensome yoke of the mandarins.”¹⁴⁵ Lê Bá Đ nh's provocations culminated in a failed

emperor, even though he was deposed on July 29th, 1907. A 1907 completion date also accounts for the inclusion of information which postdates the proposed 1903 manuscript submission, natural disasters such as 1904 floods and 1905 pestilence. Yet, other information in the text implies that it was updated later still, for example the Mytho girls school appears in lines 3983, and Governor General Klobukowski is mentioned in line 2497, both of which occurred in 1908. In April of 1909 Nguyễn Liên Phong had sent a letter to then Governor of Cochinchina Outrey requesting that he purchase 4,000 copies to help defray costs of printing. He never received a response. Then, on September 30th, 1909, he sent a similar letter to the Conseil Colonial. The letter was discussed at the October 11th session and tabled indefinitely with the justification that there were insufficient funds. For letter to Outrey see 1826 4/15/1909 IA8/032. For letter to Colonial Council see *Proces Verbaux Session Ordinaire* 1909 p153

¹⁴⁴ Much of the information about Đinh Thái Sơn comes from the text under examination. That he was from a scholarly family is stated by the line “G c d ng khoa mục tr m anh r  r ng” in *Figures and Folkways*. His entry in *Verses of Homage* p241 makes the Christian and military connection explicit “ ng b  lớp trước thơ đạo Thiên Chúa” and “Truy nguyên  ng thân [...] t n l   ng Đinh Hữu B , th u trai c  sức hùng d ng, thi đ u V  c  h ng nh t, c  l m quan ra gi p nước, công c n c ng nhiều. [...] l  v  d ng si u qu n [...]”

¹⁴⁵ In February 1879 Đ nh presented a petition to the authorities requesting French intervention in Tonkin on behalf of 32 notables. In October, he led a failed putsch attempt on the citadel of Nam Đ nh with the collaboration of a Saigonese French publicist, English merchants and C t B  Island Chinese pirates, using ships loaned by the German trading house Landstein & Co. According to a note in a Nguyễn imperial chronicle, this doomed attempt to install a Tonkinese Republic was aborted when, at the last second, Governor Le Myre de Vilers notified the English captain that the affair had not been authorized by the French. The small rebel force on the ground, left without reinforcement, was annihilated. Undeterred, Đ nh and his partisans presented a second petition on December 8th, 1881, again requesting the French intervene to push Tu Duc to adopt significant political reforms. Should the

putsch at the citadel of Nam Định in October 1879, killing his lieutenants and disgracing him. Lê Bá Đảng likely brought Đinh Thái Sơn to Cochinchina on his return trip south. Emperor Duy Tân's 1911 memorial corroborates this timeline. Awarding the *kim khánh* to Đinh Thái Sơn alongside Nguyễn Liên Phong, the emperor described Đinh Thái Sơn as having ““come to Saigon as a 12-year-old boy to make a living. Since then, more than thirty years have passed. He has opened a large printing operation and trained many apprentices.” Dated August 1911, the memorial places Đinh Thái Sơn's journey south in 1881 and his birth in 1869.¹⁴⁶

Lê Bá Đảng's death left Đinh Thái Sơn orphaned, and Father Genibrel appears to have raised him at the Tân Định Cathedral. He apprenticed there at the Imprimerie de la Mission à Tân Định, which in those days held a colonial contract to print educational and official materials. Đinh Thái Sơn moved on to the imprimerie Auguste Bosc, then to the Imprimerie Nationale.¹⁴⁷ In 1897 Đinh Thái Sơn went into business for himself. He established a combination printshop, bookstore, office supply, and bicycle repair shop, naming it Phát Toán in honor of his father-in-law Câu Toán, who provided the capital. With Trương Vĩnh Ký's intercession, Đinh Thái Sơn won state contracts and expanded his operations. He sold the government-contracted bookbinding side of his business to an office supply store entrepreneur named Nguyễn Hữu Viêt around 1903, when the first advertisements for Phát Toán titles began appearing in *Talking Business*.¹⁴⁸ Đinh Thái Sơn had only two titles advertised for sale in 1904 and was still awaiting official delivery of a printing machine. But in 1906 he expanded his shop, and the expansion continued through 1915, by which time he had printed at least 105 titles — likely more, given gaps in library holdings and depot legal registrations.

Đinh Thái Sơn's business connections reached the top of the colonial elite. In 1913 he founded a new printing operation with Lê Phát An, son of Lê Phát Đạt, whom contemporaries reputed the

emperor not heed the demands, Đảng argued, Tonkin should secede and declare itself an independent republic in an “eternal alliance” with France. Though Đảng's schemes seem insane, they nonetheless appear to have influenced Admiral Jaugueberry's and Governor Le Myre de Vilers' perception of the situation on the ground, where they thought there to be widespread public dissatisfaction with Nguyen rule due to official corruption and Chinese pirate exploitation of the local Vietnamese. Đảng returned to Cochinchina, bankrupt and disgraced. Đảng appears to have been bankrupted by his failed schemes. An April 1883 notice in the *Journal Officiel* advertised the seizure and auction of twelve of his properties near the provincial school in Thủ Dầu Một, many of them bearing expensive tile-roofed wood houses. According to the notice, the properties were seized according to a ruling in a court hearing held on the 5th of March 1881, at the behest of Mr. Tang-Keng-Ho, a Hokkien shop owner, opium licensee, and a founding member of the Saigon Municipal Council. Đảng seems to have died shortly after, though I have yet to establish a date. Sơn Nam claims Đảng was a tonsured monk but provides no citation. Đảng's disgrace is made clear by the way Nguyễn Liên Phong invokes the example of Đảng in *Figures and Folklore* as an exemplar of the fate awaiting men who indulge in a pathological lust for power. See Taboulet, *Geste Française en Indochine* t II. p 765, For the strange position of Landstein & Co see summary in Joyaux, “à la origine de l'essai du sapeque Tu Duc 1870,” *Journal de la société française numismatique* sept 1 2012; For Nguyen empire's official account see Kiêu Oánh Mậu, *Bản Triều Bận Nghịch Liệt Truyện* 1963 p52a; for Sơn Nam's account see Sơn Nam, *Đất Gia Định Xưa, Bến Nghé Xưa, Người Sài Gòn*, 2021 p335-336. The relevant section appears in the *Cầu Kho* chapter of the book *Bến Nghé Xưa* for those consulting a previous edition with different pagination. For Nguyễn Liên Phong see *Figures and Folklore*, p196

¹⁴⁶ Phủ Phụ chính 27,6 Duy Tân thứ 5, Châu bản triều Nguyễn, tttlqg 1 DT5, 181-182/30

¹⁴⁷ *Figures and Folkways* p196

¹⁴⁸ Nguyen Huu Viet's entry in *Figures and Folkways* gives us the rough date as “đã mười hai năm”, 12 years from the publishing of the book gives us 1903. P252. Special thanks to Cao Vy who forwarded unpublished draft chapters from her dissertation.

wealthiest colonial collaborator.¹⁴⁹ Lê Phát An inherited Lê Phát Đạt's fortune and married the granddaughter of the collaborator patriarch Trần Tử Ca, whom royalist rebels killed in the 1885 uprising in the 18 Betel Groves of Hóc Môn. He was also uncle to Nguyễn Hữu Thị Lan, better known as Princess Nam Phương, future wife of Emperor Bảo Đại, Vietnam's last king. This marriage was a near-perfect emblem of the unity of the Cochinchinese collaborator gentry and the Nguyễn empire under the Franco-Nguyễn Détente. When Lê Phát An partnered with Đinh Thái Sơn to establish a printshop, they named the company *L'Imprimerie de l'Union*; the same company, after Lê Phát An sold it to Nguyễn Văn Cửa, would print the 1920s Saigon paper *L'Echo Annamite*.

Nguyễn Liên Phong emphasized the choice of name in three separate places: “the shop was branded the *Imprimerie de l'Union*, which in demotic script would be *Đồng Hiệp*, meaning *combining strength as though of one heart* to ensure big business progresses day by day.”¹⁵⁰ Literary Chinese had used “đồng hiệp” [同協] and especially the longer slogan “combining strength as though of one heart” [đồng tâm hiệp lực — 同心協力] since at least the eighth century; readers would have recognized the phrase from its description of the protagonists' fraternity in the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. Lương Khắc Ninh had used it as a political slogan since the first issues of *Talking Business*, urging wealthy Vietnamese to abandon selfish and racially harmful usury and to pool capital with fellow Vietnamese in business partnerships against foreign competitors.

A final anecdote from Đinh Thái Sơn's life ties him to the Mekong figures behind *Talking Business* and conveys the Franco-Nguyễn Détente's social atmosphere. The party held for him after Duy Tân awarded him the kim khánh shows that these men travelled in the same circles. The guests migrated from Vietnamese-owned restaurants with names like “Le Progrès” to Vietnamese-owned hát bội [classical southern Vietnamese opera] theaters, where champagne toasts showered Đinh Thái Sơn. Mekong Delta journalist, Chinese translator, and then chief editor of *Talking Business* Nguyễn Chánh Sắt gave a speech recalling that he had known Đinh Thái Sơn since he was a boy apprenticing at Tân Định. Nguyễn Chánh Sắt congratulated him on behalf of the paper in terms that framed his career as a rags-to-riches story, one that exemplified the values *Talking Business* had been extolling for more than a decade: only “big business” [đại thương] could save the Vietnamese from foreign subjection. As though awarding the kim khánh did not already show enough Nguyễn state support, Lê Bá Cử — described as an “Annamite official from Huế” — followed Nguyễn Chánh Sắt's toast with his own, reading poems by two high-ranking Nguyễn officials: *hoàng giáp* [second-rank palace examination graduate] Phạm Như Xương, the current *Đốc học* [provincial director of education], and *Tôn Thất Mỹ*, an *Án Sát* [provincial judicial commissioner]. Both poems congratulate Đinh Thái Sơn in terms that describe his achievements in the modern print industry as a Vietnamese domestication of

¹⁴⁹ His wealth was immortalized in the oft-repeated folk saying “First Sy, second Phuong, third Xuong, fourth Hoa” [Nhất Sỹ, Nhì Phương, Tam Xường, Tứ Hòa]. Lê Phát Đạt is Sỹ, while Phuong is the other early collaborator Đỗ Hữu Phương.

¹⁵⁰ “đặt tên hiệu tiệm là Imprimerie de l'Union, cắt nghĩa ra chữ như gọi là: Đồng Hiệp, Nghĩa [sic] là hai bên đồng tâm hiệp lực làm cho đại thương cuộc càng ngày càng tấn bộ luôn luôn,” *Verses of Homage* entry for Trần Thị Thơ p 275. This is Lê Phát An's wife, curiously he doesn't have an entry of his own, but figures in other people's entries. Almost identical terms are used in Đinh Thái Sơn's entry, where the synonymous “đồng lòng hiệp sức” is used instead. See also *Figures and Folkways* p197 for a similar message in Phong's demotic script poem for Sơn

European technology: a contribution to the Vietnamese in general and to the dynasty in particular.¹⁵¹

Endorsements: a profile of the renovationist gentry intelligentsia

A wide range of the Cochinchinese elite lent moral support to the project through poetic endorsements that Nguyễn Liên Phong collected and published in the appendix. Because he curated these congratulatory poems, they reveal who one of the era's most knowledgeable observers considered prestigious; the list of endorsers offers an emic perspective on the intellectual leaders of the moment. The orthodox account holds that the turn-of-the-century Cochinchinese elite was a French-educated, urban group cut off from rural Vietnamese society and dependent on colonial office; against that account, the composition of these endorsements is surprising. Just as the founders of Cochinchinese print capitalism prized their connections to the Nguyễn empire, Nguyễn Liên Phong's endorsers comprise a coalition of Mekong notables, Saigonese clerks, and Annamese activists — evidence that colonial collaboration after the Franco-Nguyễn Détente drew a broader range of Vietnamese into its orbit than the orthodox account allows.

The two books carry eighteen endorsement poems: sixteen at the end of *Figures and Folkways* under the heading "The poems from our brethren have been written below" [Những mấy bài của anh em tặng đã biên ra sau này], and two more in the front matter of *Verses of Homage*. One endorsement runs in plain prose; the rest take the form of eight-line heptasyllabic regulated verse. All praise Nguyễn Liên Phong's erudition, hard work, and style, and underscore the importance of recording noteworthy Cochinchinese for posterity. Endorsers in most cases signed their poems with a name, office title, and location. The twelfth poem, for example, is signed "Respectfully, Secretary Nguyễn Hữu Vang, Saigon." These signatures let me categorize the endorsements by province and career type, and where the signature was uninformative, I supplemented from passages within *Figures and Folkways* and *Verses of Homage* describing the individual. I sort career types into two groups, office-holders and non-office-holders. I subdivide office-holders into three subcategories: High Officials, meaning men who held actual or honorary ranks above canton chief [cai tổng]; Low Officials, meaning functionaries in the colonial ministries or rural offices from canton chief down to village notables; and Elected Officials, those who listed elected seats in the various colonial councils. Non-office-holders include self-described "reclusive gentlemen" (explained below), literary figures, traditional medicine practitioners, and teachers. I sort the provincial origins into three regions. East of the Vaico covers the land stretching from the Vaico River to the Annam border in the east, including the broader Gia Định plateau. West of the Vaico marks the start of the Mekong Delta. Figures from outside French Cochinchina I assign to Annam. Two features of the resulting data stand out: a roughly even split between office-holders and non-office-holders, and a strong concentration of endorsers in the Mekong Delta.

¹⁵¹ Most interesting of all perhaps is that this whole account is appended to a lengthy 6/8-meter verse poem recounting emperor Thành Thái's visit to Saigon in 1897, and which Đinh Thái Sơn published at least 3 separate editions. This event is discussed in detail later in Chapter 4 of this dissertation. See Đặng Lễ Nghi, *Ngự Du Gia Định Diễn Ca*, 3rd ed. (L'Imprimerie de l'Union, 1917), 13–15.

Area	Individuals
East of Vaico River	4
Gia Định	2
Sài Gòn	2
West of Vaico River (Mekong Delta)	13
Gò Công	1
Long Xuyên	2
Mỹ Tho	7
Sa Đéc	1
Vĩnh Long	2
Annam	2
Nghệ An	2
Total	19

Title type	Individuals
Office holders	10
High Official	5
Low Official	4
Elected Office	1
Non-office holders	9
Reclusive Gentlemen	4
Literary	2
Traditional Medicine	2
Teacher	1
Total	19

That so many high officials endorsed Nguyễn Liên Phong's work befits its character as propaganda extolling France's civilizing work and praising its most faithful servants. The endorsements include colonial partisans like Trần Bá Thọ, son of the early collaborator Trần Bá Lộc, whose family had spread into distant corners of the pre-WWI elite. Trần Bá Thọ's listed rank, "tổng đốc" [governor general], far exceeded his actual responsibilities; he performed no direct administrative functions. Endorsements from the other high-ranking figures — three tri phủ [large county chief] and a militia captain — sit side by side with the lower-ranking secretaries, canton chiefs, and deputy chiefs, registering agreement up and down the colonial hierarchy.

The non-office-holders are more interesting. One endorser, Trịnh Hoài Nghĩa, signed "teacher at Chasseloup-Laubat" [bổn quốc giáo thọ], the most prestigious colonial school. Trịnh Hoài Nghĩa was the great-grandson of Trịnh Hoài Đức, author of Vietnam's most famous imperial gazetteer; Nguyễn Liên Phong likely sought the endorsement as a way to claim Trịnh Hoài Đức's literary and political legacy. The literary category includes men who listed no title but circulated as noted

poets and musicians in the nascent *tài tử* [southern Vietnamese chamber music] scene, such as Phụng Hoàng San. They gathered around Nguyễn Liên Phong because of his role in founding and propagating these forms of Vietnamese performance.¹⁵² The category undercounts men with literary reputations who listed only their official ranks, such as Tổng Hữu Định, who led the renovation and expansion of the Vĩnh Long Temple of Literature in 1903. An early figure in the *cải lương* [reformed southern Vietnamese opera] movement, he gave only his official rank *phó tổng* [deputy canton chief].

The reclusive-gentleman category, which groups three titles — *dật sĩ*, *du sĩ*, and *lữ đệ* — deserves the closest attention. A *dật sĩ* is a scholar-gentleman who has withdrawn from political affairs into an eremitic life of contemplation. Such a man would in normal circumstances be serving the state; for ethical or philosophical reasons, these figures shunned public life. Consider one self-described *dật sĩ*, Lê Quốc Tá, a precolonial commander of a military settlement [*đồn điền*] in Gò Công under Nguyễn Tri Phương. Rather than serve the new regime, he retired to the Cầu Ông Lãnh neighborhood of Saigon and made a living practicing traditional medicine.¹⁵³ A second self-declared *dật sĩ* was Trần Thịnh Dự, father of another signatory, deputy canton chief Trần Anh Các. Trần Thịnh Dự was a high-ranking notable in the Orchard Heartland village of Dưỡng Diêm and belonged to the poetry circle around Nguyễn Văn Lạc, better known as Học Lạc. In his case, the title may carry the political implication of refusing colonial office, or may simply mark privileged retirement; the evidence does not let me decide.

Du sĩ [travelling gentleman] and *lữ đệ* [visiting guest] carry more pointed, if still ambiguous, political overtones. Three men signed with these titles: Hồ Xuân Lang and Nguyễn Trung Thanh as *du sĩ*, and Trần Hàm Trung as *Sa Đéc tỉnh lữ đệ*, “guest in Sa Đéc.” I have not been able to identify Nguyễn Trung Thanh, but his Nghệ An origin is noteworthy in light of the other two. Vietnamese historian Cao Tự Thanh argues that Hồ Xuân Lang is Hồ Xuân Lan, the birth name of the Go East Movement student turned Guangdong revolutionary exile better known by his *nom de guerre* Hồ Học Lãm.¹⁵⁴ Cao Tự Thanh argues that Hồ Học Lãm wrote the endorsement while teaching traditional medicine in the large Mekong Delta village of Chợ Giữa–Vĩnh Kim Đông, in Mỹ Tho province. If so, Hồ Học Lãm had read the manuscript and dedicated the poem before leaving for Japan, which, according to his daughter’s memoir, he did in 1906.¹⁵⁵

An endorsement from Hồ Học Lãm, an anti-colonial revolutionary then in exile, for an avowedly pro-colonial book seems implausible at first; Trần Hàm Trung’s endorsements makes it more plausible by showing similar links to North-Central Region literati activists. Trần Hàm Trung’s endorsement, however, has features worth noting. First, it appears in *Verses of Homage*, not *Figures and Folkways*. Nguyễn Liên Phong likely sought it several years after the colonial state arrested the 1908 Reform Movement activists. By 1915, when Nguyễn Liên Phong published

¹⁵² See chapter 4 of this dissertation.

¹⁵³ *Figures and Folkways* p257

¹⁵⁴ Lãm never became a party member but he was related to Ho Chi Minh by marriage and would become deeply imbricated in wider Vietnamese revolutionary networks in China. Adding a superfluous “g” to words ending in “n” is a Cochinchinese spelling convention typical during the period, and the poem itself displays other typically Cochinchinese spelling conventions, such as *hườn* instead of *hoàn*. While it would seem unlikely that a Nghệ An native would employ such conventions, it is not unreasonable for the poem to have been dictated or translated by a local. Cao Tự Thanh provides no citation for this information, and I have unfortunately been unable to corroborate it. *Figures and Folkways* p452

¹⁵⁵ Hồi tưởng về cha tôi- chí sĩ hồ học lãm. Hồ Mộ La, *Hồi tưởng về cha tôi Hồ Học Lãm* (Nhà xuất bản Phụ nữ, 2011)

Verses of Homage, lines had hardened, and parts of the nativist pro-business politics these men pursued had fallen afoul of groups within the French Colon community. The other endorsement in *Verses of Homage* was Nguyễn Văn Cường's, a *tri phủ* [prefect] of the Thủ Đức area east of Saigon and a longtime member of the Colonial Council. Nguyễn Văn Cường is the kind of indigenous high-society notable whose endorsement one would expect. Trần Hàm Trung is by contrast all but unknown. His self-description as a "guest" in Sa Đéc suggests now missing insider knowledge. Trần Hàm Trung's endorsement is also unusual: he was the only signatory to write in literary Chinese, suggesting either that he did not know *quốc ngữ* or that he thought the script unworthy of the genre's dignity.

One clue ties Trần Hàm Trung firmly to the other Nghệ An du sĩ signatories. It comes from an unlikely source: a quasi-autobiographical essay Trần Nguơn Phiêu wrote in 2005 about a tomb in the Mekong Delta market town Cao Lãnh purportedly belonging to Ho Chi Minh's father, Nguyễn Sinh Sắc. Trần Nguơn Phiêu was a medical doctor, former ARVN colonel, and historian of Cochinchinese Trotskyism who moved to Amarillo, Texas after the collapse of the RVN in 1975.¹⁵⁶ Most relevant here is that Dr. Trần Nguơn Phiêu identifies Trần Hàm Trung as his uncle from Hà Tĩnh, exiled to Nha Môn, Sa Đéc for his affiliation with the Tonkin Free School [Đông Kinh Nghĩa Thục, the 1907–1908 reformist school movement in Hanoi suppressed by the colonial state]. The same fate awaited other Tonkin Free School activists after parole from the prison island of Poulo Condor: the colonial state sent Phan Châu Trinh to Mỹ Tho, Vũ Hoành to Sa Đéc, Dương Bá Trạc to Long Xuyên, Nguyễn Quyền to Bến Tre, and Lương Văn Can to Phnom Penh. Trần Hàm Trung, the essay reports, sought out Trần Nguơn Phiêu's unnamed grandfather, a partisan of the royalist anti-French rebel general Phan Đình Phùng who had emigrated south after troops razed his village during the failure of the Save the King [Cần Vương] uprising of 1885–1889. Through Trần Hàm Trung's introduction, Trần Nguơn Phiêu boarded with Vũ Hoành while attending the provincial school in Sa Đéc, where he apparently helped maintain Hồ Chí Minh's father's grave.¹⁵⁷

I close this examination of the preface and appendices of the two texts by setting their information against a broader historical process. The transition to a civilian government and the subsequent focus on economic development through large bond issuances and public works projects opened an Indochinese moment in which local capitalists developed subsidiary industries. Historians have rightly focused on the French Colon experience of this transition, but an analogous, narrower transformation also took place among indigenous Vietnamese collaborators, the population the colonial administration most actively cultivated for participation in this development.¹⁵⁸ This social transformation produced a political movement during the first two decades of the twentieth century, and nascent Vietnamese print capitalism became its central medium. *Figures and Folkways* set out to document this colonial belle époque, and its

¹⁵⁶ Trần Nguơn Phiêu, "Năm mộ ông Thầy Quảng" last accessed May 10 2024

¹⁵⁷ A "Trần Nguơn" family appears in the *Verses of Homage*, though I have yet to confirm whether the shared patronym is more than coincidental. According to the relevant entries in *Verses of Homage*, the paterfamilias Trần Nguơn Vị was an 8th degree mandarin [bát phẩm] in the Nguyễn imperial state who rallied to the French during colonization and advanced to the rank of "provincial governor" [Đốc phủ sứ], typically the highest rank except in extraordinary cases. Vị's son, Trần Nguơn Hanh, was sent to France to teach Vietnamese. While abroad he earned a law degree, returning to practice in Saigon. He died young and was survived by his son Trần Nguơn Chấn a.k.a. Hữu Quang, who worked at the Saigon Hôtel de Ville [toà xã tây].

¹⁵⁸ Sasges "Scaling the Commanding Heights". Ibid, Christopher Goscha, *Going Indochinese: Contesting Concepts of Space and Place in French Indochina*. (Singapore, NIAS 2012)

publication put a founder of Vietnamese print capitalism, Đinh Thái Sơn, at the center of that effort. Đinh Thái Sơn and Nguyễn Liên Phong both embody their moment's defining elements: both were late-nineteenth-century emigres from the Central Region, with shadowy but formative ties to the early colony's military and religious infrastructure. The convergence of the new civilian government and the Franco-Nguyễn D t nt  brought together Vietnamese colonial partisans and former "anti-colonial" militants in a shared project of cultural renewal and nativist business expansion. The endorsements attest to the range of this coalition; the following section examines which "figures" and "folkways" Nguyễn Liên Phong singled out for praise. The endorsements point to a moment in which collaboration absorbed Vietnamese across the political spectrum because no organized anti-colonial alternative was yet on offer — not because contributors lacked private "anti-colonial" sympathies. Their expected timelines for national independence varied, but a project of cultural renewal and business nativism would in time collide with the colonial arrangement. Before the end of the First World War, the Cochinchinese elite were committed to Vietnamese national expansion under French colonial authority, and endorsements for a book like *Figures and Folkways*, which presents a rosy view of French colonial modernity, could come both from colonialists like Trần Bá Thọ and Nguyễn Văn Cường -- a tổng đốc and đốc phủ sứ respectively-- and from former and future anti-colonialists like Lê Quốc Tá, Hồ Học L m, and Trần Hàm Trung. I show below that this contradiction was rooted in the network's geographic center of gravity in the Orchard Lands. The region had been a Nguyễn stronghold during the Tây Sơn Wars and a redoubt for resistance fighters fleeing the French conquest. It was also home to some of the most aggressive boosters of the colonial project, such as Trần Bá Lộc and Trương Vĩnh Ký. The Orchard Lands produced colonial reformers like Bùi Quang Chiêu and colonial hardliners like Lê Quang Trinh; the colonial state used the same region as the place of exile for the 1908 Reform Movement activists; and the region was the heartland of millenarian violence, rural banditry, and — later — communism. The poetic and demographic information in *Figures and Folkways* and *Verses of Homage* shows the Delta as a stronghold of traditional cultural values relative to Frenchified Saigon and Chinese mercantile Cholon, a place where both "colonial" and "anti-colonial" forms of heroic conduct were possible.

Spatial representations in the structure of *Figures and Folkways*

The remainder of this chapter examines the structure of *Figures and Folkways* and the demographic features of the individuals named in both *Figures and Folkways* and *Verses of Homage*. By comparing chapter sizes against colonial provincial statistical measures, I identify four subregions: two centers, the Orchard Heartland of the Mekong Delta and the Gia Định Core, and two hinterlands, the Eastern Fringe and the Western Fringe. I examine the 27 demotic-script passages that appear throughout the text and argue from their uneven distribution and character that, first, the colonial era moved the center of demotic-script production from the Gia Định Core to the Orchard Heartland; and second, that the inclusion of these passages records the survival of a sphere of Confucian gentility still circulating between Cochinchina and the Nguyễn-ruled protectorates of Annam and Tonkin. Finally, I examine the demographic information available for the several hundred individuals named in the two books. The data give a portrait of the turn-of-the-century elite that no other source provides, and they show continuity in local power across Cochinchina, particularly sharp in the Orchard Heartland.

Genre

Before embarking on this analysis, I need to discuss the text's unusual character. By gazetteer I mean a Sinitic genre of regional reference work that compiles a place's geography, history, customs, products, and notable inhabitants for administrators and scholars. Vietnamese historians widely consider *Figures and Folkways* the most important southern gazetteer behind only Trịnh Hoài Đức's foundational 1822 *Gia Định thành thông chí* (hereafter GDTTC). It carries some typical qualities of the genre and breaks from others. Both GDTTC and the later 1872 chữ Nôm gazetteer *Nam kỳ lục tỉnh địa dư chí*, written by a colonial civil servant, used prose. Prose is also standard for national geographies such as the *Đại Nam nhất thống chí*. *Figures and Folkways* covers the physical and social characteristics of locales within particular terrain like other geographies, but its commitment to verse drives it to prize poetics over information. GDTTC organizes its information into thematic sections — physical geography [sơn xuyên], folkways [phong tục], economic life [vật sản] — while *Figures and Folkways*' chapters have no discernible internal logic. Nguyễn Liên Phong prized aesthetic considerations, especially meter and rhyme, over the obligation to cover all the cantons within a province.

These literary features resemble another southern chữ Nôm genre, the ode [vịnh 詠]. Trương Vĩnh Ký's 1882 anthology *Saigon d'autrefois* collects examples; one of them, *Cổ Gia Định phong cảnh vịnh* [the ode to scenes at old Gia Định] uses a mix of meters for different parts of the text, like *Figures and Folkways*. It likewise focuses on scenes of daily life around the city — women praying for fertility at a pagoda, the grinding sound of a rice mill, an oarsman pausing to watch a foreign woman prance through the street with a basket. The narrative in these odes, like *Figures and Folkways*, moves between bird's-eye views of geographic features and slices of life at local landmarks, alongside reflections on the nature of life and descriptions of the reputation and physiognomy of local notables. *Figures and Folkways* may draw directly on *Kim Gia Định phong cảnh vịnh* [ode to scenes at new Gia Định], a 152-line 6-8-meter verse ode written between 1862 and 1882. Like *Figures and Folkways*, it addresses the changed urban landscape — part Vietnamese, part French — of post-conquest Saigon. The poet, like Nguyễn Liên Phong decades later, trains his gaze on French administrative buildings, steamships, powered looms, and mills. Whether *Kim Gia Định phong cảnh vịnh* served as a specific model for Nguyễn Liên Phong is hard to prove. What is clear is that poets used longform 6-8-meter verse narrative for a range of purposes — the colonial collaborator Trần Tử Ca's ode-history of the French conquest *Thơ Nam Kỳ*, or the southern ode tales by the anti-colonial poet Nguyễn Đình Chiểu. Although 6-8 verse appeared in some gazetteers and travel guides, and although *Figures and Folkways* is clearly a gazetteer of sorts, it blurs already-foggy genre boundaries in a way characteristic of nineteenth-century chữ-Nôm literature.

Structure and distribution of main text elements

Figures and Folkways comprises 25 chapters including the preface and appendix discussed above. An introductory chapter delineates the boundaries of the colony, followed by 22 chapters each devoted to an administrative unit. These units do not correspond to colonial administrative boundaries at any moment in the colony's history, indicating that Nguyễn Liên Phong did not intend to educate readers about colonial administrative geography. Each chapter has two sections: an introductory heptasyllabic regulated-verse poem that previews the figures and landmarks featured in the main text, and a main text section in 6-8-meter verse that covers noteworthy figures and folkways of each administrative area. Chapters carry no subsection

headings to mark themes, and they do not commit to covering themes consistently across chapters. The narrative is difficult to follow. It moves from one anecdote to the next in unbroken poetic meter. Uneven topical coverage, archaic language, and outdated spelling conventions make the text unusually difficult to interpret, likely part of why it has rarely featured in scholarship of any language.¹⁵⁹

These obstacles obscure a straightforward research question: do patterns in Nguyễn Liên Phong's description of the colony reveal geographic variation in both his attitude toward each place and the makeup of the local gentry networks that supported him? I have established that he was a well-situated emic observer of the Cochinchinese elite of the period. Mapping how he distributed his attention across the colony therefore tells us a great deal about the worldview of the turn-of-the-century colonized elite. To analyze the unwieldy text, I coded and counted themes as they appeared throughout the chapters. First, comparing chapter size to provincial statistical measures lets me infer four subregions. The subregions then let me compare the relative frequency of figure types and phenomena across the text.

Inferring subregions by comparing chapters

Nguyễn Liên Phong's spatial imagination shows in the uneven distribution of his attention across provinces. The chapter on Vũng Tàu runs only 77 lines while the chapter on Saigon runs 1,001 lines. Chapters vary not only in length but in the number of individuals named: Vũng Tàu names none, Saigon names 29. The Mỹ Tho chapter, two-thirds the length of the Saigon chapter, names 50 individuals to Saigon's 29. This uneven distribution of "figures" and "folkways" raises a question: does chapter length reflect the geographic concentration of the elite Nguyễn Liên Phong wrote about, or does it also reflect external factors such as a province's size, integration into the colonial state, or economic significance? Assessing proportionality requires looking together at the relative "size" of each province, the number of figures named, and the number of lines dedicated.

The table below presents the relevant data. It draws population estimates from the 1909 Indochina Yearbook and adds two measures. The "student ratio" compares each province's integration into the colonial system by dividing population by the number of Franco-Indigene primary school students; a higher ratio means lower integration. The tax-revenue column gives the sum of urban and agricultural land taxes on indigenous properties, a rough gauge of each province's economic importance. This measure understates the commercial centrality of Saigon-Cholon but allows useful comparison to gauge each province's economic importance.

¹⁵⁹ Hue Tam Ho Tai is an important exception. She cites *Figures and Folkways* via Sơn Nam. *Millenarianism and Peasant Politics in Vietnam*, (Harvard University Press, 1983) p 188.

Chapter	Lines	Figures	Population	Tax revenue	Student ratio
Sài Gòn	14.92%	8.66%	1.60%	1.23%	34
Mỹ Tho	9.85%	14.93%	8.33%	7.64%	36
Chợ Lớn	7.85%	7.16%	10.89%	5.88%	53
Bến Tre	6.60%	11.94%	8.09%	7.48%	38
Gia Định	6.04%	5.37%	8.28%	2.88%	32
Tân An	5.86%	6.57%	2.83%	2.90%	25
Trà Vinh	5.56%	6.57%	6.24%	7.59%	60
Châu Đốc	5.04%	2.69%	4.54%	3.58%	41
Vĩnh Long	4.37%	8.06%	4.33%	6.29%	76
Sa Đéc	3.47%	4.48%	5.68%	4.59%	72
Bà Rịa	3.44%	3.28%	1.66%	0.70%	36
Gò Công	3.23%	4.78%	2.48%	3.36%	24
Biên Hoà	2.88%	2.09%	3.47%	2.01%	46
Tây Ninh	2.76%	1.19%	2.25%	0.90%	30
Rạch Giá	2.67%	0.90%	3.01%	7.64%	27
Thủ Dầu Một	2.58%	1.19%	3.64%	1.08%	38
Long Xuyên	2.58%	1.19%	4.79%	4.77%	35
Cần Thơ	2.53%	1.79%	7.65%	11.23%	48
Hà Tiên	2.46%	3.28%	0.40%	0.17%	28
Sóc Trăng	2.43%	2.09%	5.86%	10.43%	75
Bạc Liêu	1.74%	1.79%	3.77%	7.66%	56
Vũng Tàu	1.15%	0.00%	0.19%	NA	NA
Totals	6,710	335	2,968,375	2,844,918	Mean 43

The table above gives the relative magnitudes of these variables. The data are imprecise, and I want only a rough sense of provincial proportionality, so I have replaced actual values with percentages of totals. I sort the provinces by the number of lines per chapter as a percentage of the whole text, since this gives the relative chapter size and lets me compare it to the other variables. The second column shows the number of figures per chapter as a percentage of the 335 figures named in the text. The third gives the province's population in 1909 as a percentage of the total Cochinchinese population recorded in the 1909 Yearbook (2,968,375). The fourth gives each province's share of total property tax revenue, summing agricultural and urban land taxes. The last gives the number of residents per student in the Franco-Indigenous Primary schools.

Saigon is a clear outlier, taking a large share of lines and figures but a small share of tax revenue and population. The contrast deserves caution: the property-tax measure understates Saigon's economic importance because it favors agricultural land. The population measure also understates the area's true population: although the city proper was small, the colonial zoning practices that defined its boundaries excluded much of what is now the greater Ho Chi Minh City area, then a contiguous agglomeration of Gia Định-Chợ Lớn provinces that stretched halfway

into Tân An and included densely settled peri-urban "villages" around the twin cities' main urban centers. Tân An itself has low population and tax revenue but takes an outsized share of lines and individuals; its student-to-resident ratio is low, implying it is better integrated than every province except its Vaico neighbor Gò Công. Tân An and Gò Công form the de facto border between the Delta and the Gia Định Plateau, and I term the broader agglomeration the Gia Định Core.

Cần Thơ and Sóc Trăng are also outliers: they account for more than 20% of land tax revenue and 13% of the colony's total population but receive less than 5% of lines and hold less than 4% of the figures. The line of provinces straddling the Hậu River, except for Châu Đốc, marks the far west; once Nguyễn Liên Phong crosses it, his attention drops sharply. Châu Đốc does outperform its neighbors in dedicated lines (5% of the text alone) but accounts for less than 3% of the figures, fewer even than tiny Hà Tiên. The Châu Đốc chapter shows why: it dedicates much of its space to descriptions of Khmer Buddhist and Cham Muslim rites, lending the province an exotic tint. I call the region beyond the Hậu River the Western Fringe.

A similar boundary runs east along the wooded foothills of the Annamite Cordillera. This Eastern Fringe includes Bà Rịa-Vũng Tàu, Biên Hoà, Thủ Dầu Một, and Tây Ninh. The Western Fringe received little attention despite high land-tax revenue and population numbers; the Eastern Fringe also receives little attention, but its population and revenue are also low. Its student ratio implies moderate integration, second only to the Gia Định Core.

I group the remaining provinces as the *Orchard Heartland*: the main delta provinces Bến Tre, Gò Công, Mỹ Tho, Sa Đéc, Trà Vinh, and Vĩnh Long. Bến Tre and Mỹ Tho alone account for more than a quarter of the figures named in the book, and the *Orchard Heartland* together accounts for more than 50% — even though I have categorized Tân An with the Gia Định Core despite its half-straddling position. The *Orchard Heartland* has the poorest integration, at 51 residents per student, suggesting that the elite networks and Confucian-gentility tradition supporting that high concentration of figures rested on an alternative educational infrastructure.

Row Labels	Lines	Figures	Population	Tax revenue	Student ratio
Gia Định Core	34.66%	27.76%	23.60%	12.88%	36
Orchard Heartland	33.08%	50.75%	35.16%	36.95%	51
Western Fringe	19.45%	13.73%	30.02%	45.48%	44
Eastern Fringe	12.80%	7.76%	11.22%	4.69%	38
Totals	6,710	335	2,968,375	2,844,918	Mean 43

Pairing the provinces with rough quantitative figures does not aim to create false objectivity; the pairing identifies patterns in how Nguyễn Liên Phong distributed his attention. The pattern is sharp. No fringe province accounts for more than 4% of the individuals named, and most account for less than 2%. The only fringe province to exceed 4% of the lines is Châu Đốc, and Nguyễn Liên Phong gives it that space for its Khmer and Cham elements rather than its elite population. Population size, economic significance, and integration into the colonial state cannot explain the pattern: the Western Fringe has a relatively large population and the most extensive agricultural

land, while the Eastern Fringe is better integrated than the Orchard Heartland — which still claims a third of the lines and most of the figures. Nguyễn Liên Phong's allocation of attention instead identifies two cultural centers of antebellum Cochinchina: Mỹ Tho-Bến Tre and Saigon-Chợ Lớn.

Demotic script passages and the extended sphere of Confucian gentility

Beyond the heptasyllabic introductory poems and 6-8-meter verse sections, some chapters include chữ Nôm quotes from stele inscriptions, couplets, or dedicated poems. The text contains 27 such instances totaling 2,092 characters, appearing in nine chapters and falling into four forms and three types. The four forms are heptasyllabic verse, pentasyllabic verse, couplets, and prose. The three types are quotes from historical sources, lines Nguyễn Liên Phong dedicated to others, and lines contemporaries dedicated to him. Heptasyllabic verse is the most common form (851 characters, 41%), followed by prose (681 characters, 33%). The uneven distribution and character of these passages support two arguments. First, the onset of the colonial era moved the center of chữ Nôm culture from the Gia Định Core to the Orchard Heartland. Second, their inclusion records the survival of Confucian gentility on both sides of the colonial line, in Cochinchina and in the Nguyễn-ruled protectorates of Annam and Tonkin.

Form	Character count	Percent of total
heptasyllabic	851	40.68%
prose	681	32.55%
couplet	300	14.34%
pentasyllabic	260	12.43%
Total	2092	100.00%

This distribution is misleading. The text contains only two prose entries, both in the Gia Định chapter: Hoàng Cao Khải's dedication to Lê Văn Duyệt, written during the renovation of his temple, and Gia Long's eulogy for Pigneau de Behaine. Nguyễn Liên Phong drew both quotations from the steles displayed at their respective tombs. Sorted by province, the Gia Định chapter holds most of the chữ Nôm text, with over 1,000 characters or 48% of the total; combined with Saigon, the figure rises above 60% — 681 characters of prose, 440 of heptasyllabic verse, and 137 of pentasyllabic verse. The remaining 40% spreads across the Mekong provinces west of the Vaico. The eastern abundance would seem to imply that the Gia Định Core, not the Orchard Heartland and broader Mekong Delta, was the center of Confucian gentility.

Area	Character count	Percent of total
Gia Định Core	1258	60.13%
Gia Định	1003	47.94%
Sài Gòn	255	12.19%
Western Provinces	834	39.87%
Vĩnh Long	247	11.81%
Bến Tre	183	8.75%
Mỹ Tho	161	7.70%
Sa Đéc	155	7.41%
Trà Vinh	36	1.72%
Hà Tiên	28	1.34%
Gò Công	24	1.15%
Total	2092	100.00%

This eastern bias stems largely from precolonial material. Filtering for colonial-era material shifts the balance to the Orchard Lands and Western Fringe, which together account for 67% of the remaining 1,124 chữ Nôm characters. The specific changes are striking. Filtering removes poems like Lê Văn Khôi's ode to Quy Nhơn, Gia Long's eulogy for Pigneau de Behaine, Trịnh Hoài Đức's poem for the Giác Lâm pagoda, and Hoàng Cao Khải's long prose section and poems eulogizing Lê Văn Duyệt. The remaining eastern-province passages were written by Nguyễn Liên Phong for his publisher Đinh Thái Sơn, colonial councilor Diệp Văn Cương, and Tonkinese governor Hoàng Cao Khải. A last poem, by Mỹ Tho Provincial Councilor Nguyễn Trại Lương, praises Nguyễn Liên Phong. I do not know why it appears with the eastern provinces rather than in the Mỹ Tho chapter.

Twelve poems remain in the western provinces after filtering out precolonial material. Three in Vĩnh Long: one by Nguyễn Liên Phong inaugurating the renovated Temple of Literature, and two by Nguyễn Đình Chiểu mourning Phan Thanh Giản (one of which is mistakenly attributed to Phan Thanh Giản). Two poems from Mỹ Tho eulogize the anti-colonial rebel Nguyễn Hữu Huân, one anonymously authored and the other erroneously presented as Huân's final testament. A couplet in the Gò Công chapter, written by Tôn Thọ Tường, eulogizes the early French partisan Huỳnh Công Tấn. The rest were contributed by Tonkinese and Annamese Vietnamese officials. In the Bến Tre chapter, three poems praise the luxurious banquets and refinement of Đốc Phủ Sứ Nguyễn Văn Hay, with one written by Cao Xuân Dục, a tiến sĩ [doctoral degree holder] and Nguyen privy council member, and another by Nguyễn Trung Cần, a Tonkinese tiến sĩ and tri phủ. Three additional poems from Hanoi officials praise Đốc Phủ Sứ Lê Quang Hiến of Sa Đéc: one by Ngô Xuân Định, a Tonkinese tri huyện and tiến sĩ, and two signed by the offices of the Kinh lược and Đốc Lý of Hanoi. Lê Quang Hiến's son, Lê Quang Trinh, became the first Vietnamese graduate of a French medical school and will feature in later chapters as a leading pro-Candelier monopolist of his generation. Once filtered, the data appear as follows.

Area	Character count	Percent of total
Western Provinces	750	66.73%
Vĩnh Long	247	21.98%
Bến Tre	183	16.28%
Sa Đéc	155	13.79%
Mỹ Tho	141	12.54%
Gò Công	24	2.14%
Gia Định Core	374	33.27%
Sài Gòn	255	22.69%
Gia Định	119	10.59%
Total	1124	100.00%

By including chữ Nôm passages, Nguyễn Liên Phong recorded the survival of a Confucian moral and political order: the values, ritual practices, and social hierarchies that had organized elite life under the Nguyễn empire continued to structure Cochinchinese gentility under French rule, even as the imperial state itself receded. The distribution of these passages tells us two things about the southern elite before the First World War. First, although the eastern provinces (particularly Gia Định) account for most chữ Nôm characters, the count rests on two historical figures: Cardinal Pierre Pigneau de Behaine and Lê Văn Duyệt. These two men anchored the network of collaboration that defined the antebellum period. The renovation of Lê Văn Duyệt's temple was one of the earliest independent actions by the colonial-era Cochinchinese gentry, and Hoàng Cao Khải's prose and heptasyllabic verses, written for the renovation, mark the connection between Cochinchina and the Nguyễn state system during the Franco-Nguyễn Détente. Both Pigneau de Behaine and Lê Văn Duyệt symbolized a golden age of Franco-Nguyễn collaboration that persisted through the tense concordat between French political domination and the imperial Vietnamese order it had displaced. Filtering out passages on precolonial figures shows that the heartland of this Confucian worldview shifted westward.

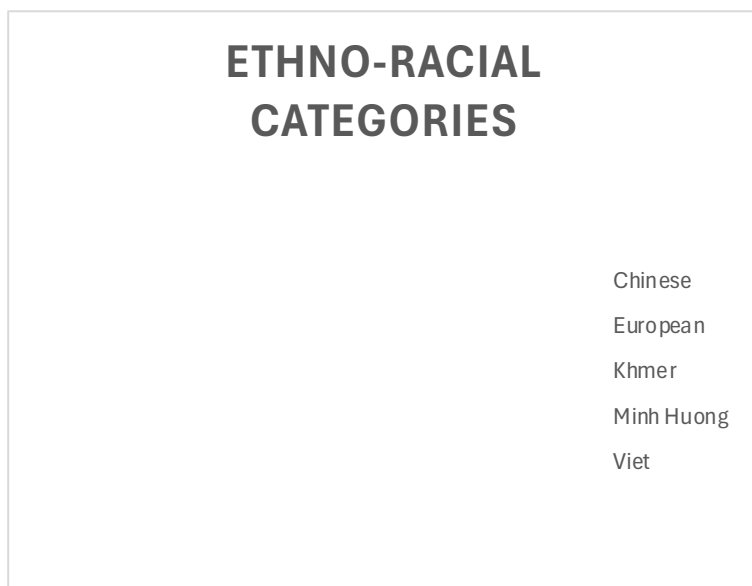
The second feature of these passages is most visible in the western provinces. Nguyễn Liên Phong included colonial-era chữ Nôm passages to amplify Annamese and Tonkinese officials' praise of Mekong gentry figures. The exchanges suggest that classical poetry continued to circulate among Cochinchinese gentry, and between Cochinchina and their Annamese and Tonkinese counterparts, and that the exchanges sustained a shared gentlemanly identity. The poems quoted in the text, like those dedicated to Nguyễn Liên Phong in the appendix, show that the invocation of gentlemanly values went beyond writing conventions and tracked an active Confucian social network on the eve of the First World War. Publishing the praise the gentry received from Nguyễn state officials suggests their sense of community extended across the borders of Indochina. The French conquest of Hanoi and the suppression of rebellions in Cambodia and Annam likely strengthened these connections, as colonial repression pushed ideas and affiliations into wider circulation. As noted earlier, the exile of Tonkin Free School activists into Delta gentlemanly circles reinforced ties with figures like Hồ Học Lãm, whose later networks in China would shape expatriate nationalism. During the Franco-Nguyễn Détente, before any clear political division had emerged between anti-colonial nationalists and Franco-

Annamite collaborators, elite networks coexisted within the shared moral order of gentlemanly virtue and patronage.

Distribution of figures and their types

The final section of this chapter examines the type and distribution of figures named in the text. The intelligentsia who wrote endorsement poems for Figures and Folkways, and the character of the chữ Nôm passages, both record a sphere of surviving Cochinchinese Confucian gentility based in the Orchard Heartland and extending into the Nguyễn-ruled lands of Annam and Tonkin. As I noted in the discussion of the text's preface, Nguyễn Liên Phong boarded with gentry figures as he traveled the colony researching the text, and he wrote to praise his hosts by connecting their wealth and achievements to their virtue and their contribution to the Vietnamese project of settling and civilizing the south. Examining the figures named therefore tells us about the gentry networks that supported his work and where the figures he names sit within longer southern lineages. The examination yields previously unavailable demographic information; it also shows that the colonial conquest did not mark a decisive break in the composition of local power-brokers, and that the turn-of-the-century elite was rooted in older elite lineages, particularly in the Orchard Heartland of the Mekong Delta.

Figures and Folkways names 335 individuals. I recorded only figures for whom some biographical information could be inferred. For many, the data are thin: part of a name, a job-title hint, an indexed location. I tabulate seven attributes: (1) the province where they appear; (2) sex; (3) race; (4) figure type; (5) any role founding or patronizing institutions; (6) whether they belong to a multigenerational elite network; and (7) attitude toward colonialism. The first three are straightforward. Entries are 95% male (312 to 14), and 87% carry no identifiable ethnic marker — which I coded as Vietnamese.



I sort figures into categories — the role for which the text most prominently features each person — working from the sparse information the text provides. The sorting is interpretive, since I read each figure in context and assign the role the text emphasizes. The Clerical category covers men who hold secretarial or interpreter positions in government ministries, which the text distinguishes from those serving in rural or urban local administrations. Colonial figures are

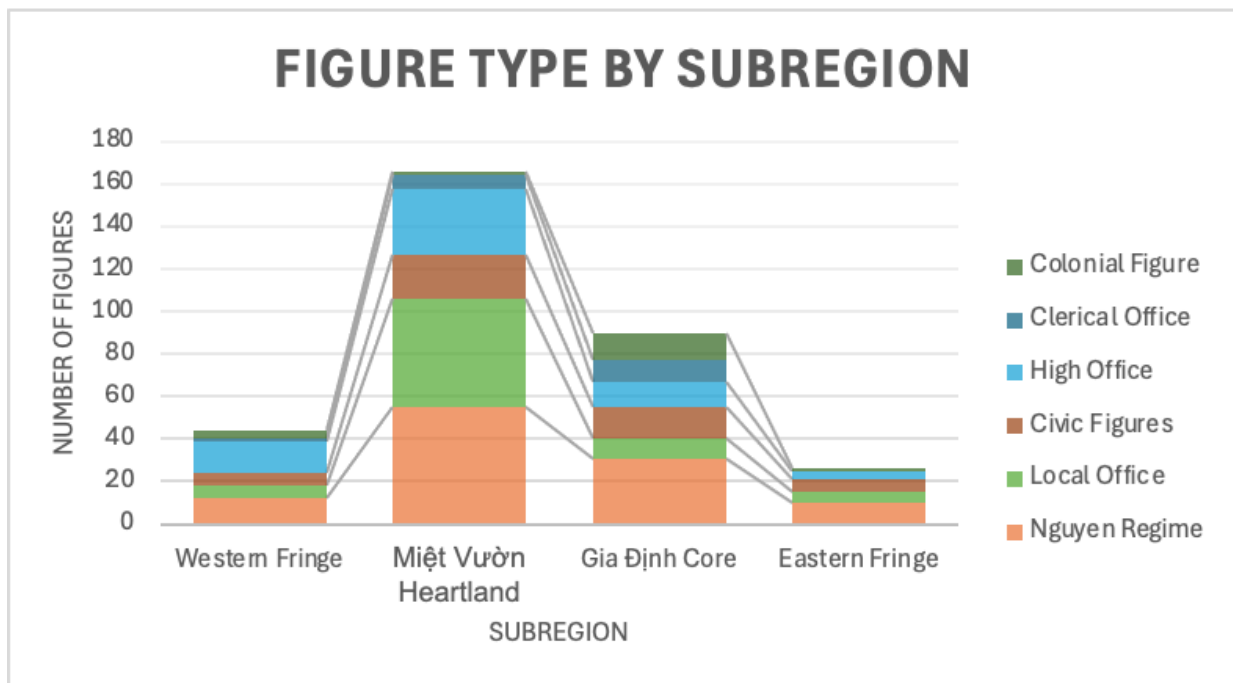
Europeans who held high office in the colonial administration: governors-general, admirals, and the like. Famous relatives are figures who feature solely as descendants of a famous person and not for other merits. High Office covers men holding ranks (including honorary ranks) above Canton Chief, meaning Tri Huyện, Tri Phủ, and Đốc phủ sứ.¹⁶⁰ Local Office covers Canton or Neighborhood chiefs and below, who sat in local district and village administrations. The Nguyễn Regime category covers men who held positions in the Nguyễn state but not in the colonial state; it excludes colonial clerks later awarded Nguyễn titles. Civic Figures covers businessmen, schoolteachers, literary figures, traditional-medicine practitioners, and itinerant sorcerers or geomancers — men whose prominence rested on civic and market functions rather than public office. Religious figures also fall under civic figures. Mostly Buddhists, they feature chiefly for their role in Buddhist history and organization and are mainly religious officials or noted disciples, not lay individuals who identify as Buddhist or hold Buddhist beliefs privately. Two religious figures are Catholic, the martyr Lê Văn Gấm and the priest Nguyễn Biểu Đoàn, and likewise figure in Vietnamese Catholic history. As with Buddhists, this category excludes notable Catholic figures who played other roles — Trương Vĩnh Ký, for instance, is here counted as a high official, not a religious figure.

Figure type	Orchard Heartland	Gia Định Core	Western Fringe	Eastern Fringe	Grand Total
Nguyen Regime	51%	29%	11%	9%	108
Local Office	72%	13%	8%	7%	71
High Office	50%	19%	24%	6%	62
Famous relative	44%	33%	22%	0%	9
Colonial Figure	10%	65%	20%	5%	20
Clerical	35%	59%	6%	0%	17
Civic Figures	44%	31%	13%	13%	48
Business	50%	30%	10%	10%	10
Sorcerer	33%	0%	0%	67%	3
Religious	25%	40%	20%	15%	20
Literature and Arts	67%	17%	17%	0%	6
Teacher	83%	17%	0%	0%	6
Traditional Medicine	33%	67%	0%	0%	3
Grand Total	170	93	46	26	335

The table above shows the distribution of figure types across the subregions identified in the previous section. Row percentages give the share of each figure type by subregion: 51% of all Nguyễn Regime figures, for example, appear in the Orchard Heartland chapters. I disaggregated the civic figures, though the categories overlap — a traditional medicine practitioner is also an entrepreneur, as is a movie-theater owner or a private publisher — and I have specified each

¹⁶⁰ Although inherited from the imperial state, under the colonial regime these ranks ceased corresponding to territorial administrative offices. Nevertheless, they would be translated as small county chief, large country chief, and province chief. Baron, count and duke would capture some of the distinctions but was ultimately avoided for fear of introducing too much confusion.

figure as precisely as the text allows. The bottom row totals figures in each subregion; the rightmost column totals each figure type across subregions. Nguyễn Regime figures are the largest type, ranging from seventeenth-century pioneers like Nguyễn Hữu Cảnh and emperors down to anonymous men recognized for their gentlemanly talents, who had passed imperial exams but whose notoriety did not extend beyond their village. Local office-holders (village through canton chief) are the next most common type, followed by high office-holders (the native political elite). Civic figures — chiefly religious — come next. Because the Orchard Heartland chapters account for over half of all figures, that subregion holds a high proportion across most types; some shares are nevertheless striking. The Orchard Heartland claims 83% of teachers (despite having the lowest student-per-resident ratio), half of the business figures, 67% of literary figures, half of the high officials, and over 70% of local officials. The Gia Định Core meanwhile holds a high proportion of colonial figures (65%), clerical workers (59%), religious figures (40%), and traditional medicine practitioners (67%). The bar chart that follows visualizes the relative proportions: columns show figure types and colored bands the share by subregion. Moving from local and high office to colonial and clerical figures, the Orchard Heartland's share shrinks against the Gia Định Core's. The Western Fringe holds a notable number of high officials, more even than the Gia Định Core.



These results are evidence of continuity in local power in the Orchard Heartland of the old Delta — a consolidation of gentry receptivity to the colonial experiment, which the press articulated as the Cochinchinese strand of conservative modernism. Talking Business expressed this strand most forcefully, but the conservative-modernist register was common in the Cochinchinese Vietnamese press before the 1920s radicalism. Figures and Folkways is an artifact of this moment. It does not claim to record a representative sample of residents or office-holders; it juxtaposes two kinds of figures. The first are historical figures whose national or local reputation was substantial enough to be recorded in imperial literature, stele inscriptions, or the folklore Nguyễn Liên Phong gathered during his travels. The second are contemporaries Nguyễn Liên Phong spent time with on his travels as the "vagabond old teacher" — the men and women who

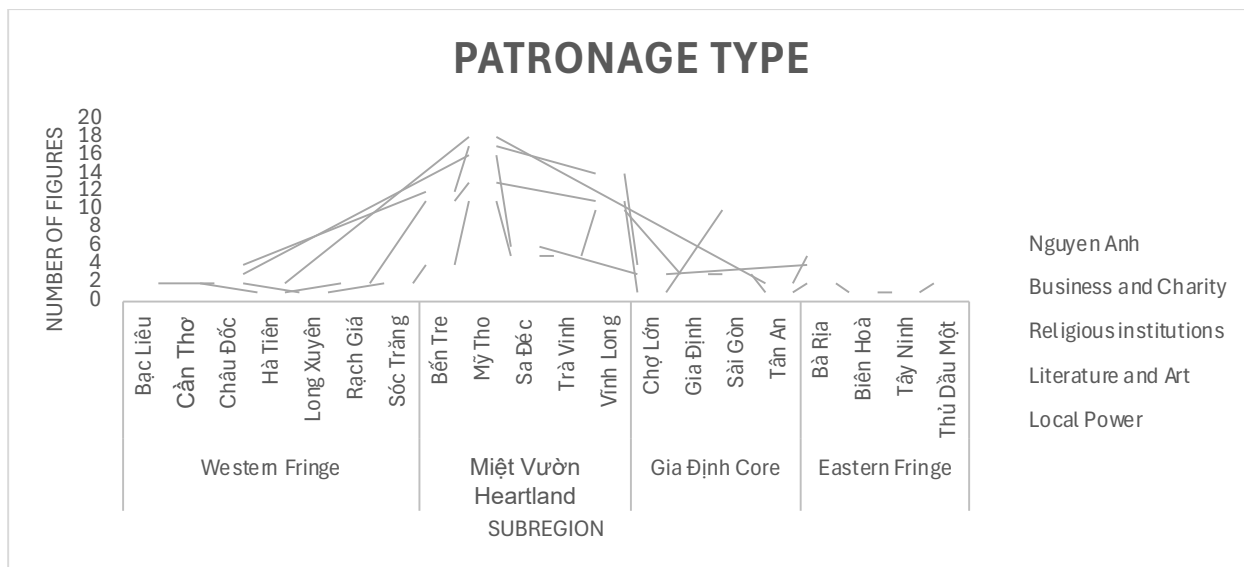
attended galas celebrating promotions or colonial awards. They sponsored performances, shared music, wine and poetry, and laid the groundwork for what became southern *tài tử* and *cải lương* music. These figures sponsored Nguyễn Liên Phong's travels in exchange for teaching their children, for calligraphy, or as payment for traditional medical treatments. They grew acquainted while collaborating on initiatives such as the renovation of the Vĩnh Long Temple of Literature, charity drives for the 1904 flood and 1905 pestilence, and the poetry contest in the pages of *Talking Business*. *Figures and Folkways* is partly a hagiographic ode to Vietnamese settler colonization of the South, and partly Nguyễn Liên Phong's account of his personal networks. Nguyễn Liên Phong was a well-traveled Confucian gentleman who left Annam in the late nineteenth century and immersed himself in the currents of South Vietnamese high culture; *Figures and Folkways* provides a geography of that culture, a culture that gave birth to and was sustained by *Talking Business*.

There is no clear line between purely "historical" figures and contemporary ones. The juxtaposition of Nguyễn officials and colonial notables works on the assumption that the contemporary elite continued the older Vietnamese colonization of the South. Sixty-eight of the 335 figures appear in multigenerational networks, with fathers, grandfathers, and sons holding positions across the levels of colonial office and occasionally across both the Nguyễn and colonial administrations. This pattern complicates the conventional account of Colonial Cochinchina, which has emphasized the role of mandarin refusal to serve in shaping the institutional structure of the colony. The retreat of the mandarins and the subsequent rise of an indigenous Catholic elite did mediate military occupation, but it did not produce a wholesale retreat and replacement of the old elite or the immediate submission of its culture. The responses to colonialism recorded among the figures show a gray zone between resistance and collaboration, particularly as the Franco-Nguyễn Détente took hold in the decades before the First World War.

Figures and Folkways records 23 rebels against the colonial conquest and 19 figures who rallied to the colonial militias. Of 28 other figures for whom I can infer a reaction to colonialism, seven left public life for gentlemanly reclusion [*dật sĩ*], devoting their efforts to medicine, geomancy, poetry, or physiognomy and refusing public office as a stance of filial piety and refusal to serve. The remaining 21 show signs of intergenerational adjustment: their forebears held office or titles in the Nguyễn administration and did not rally to the French, but their children took positions, often cantonal or village office, in the colonial administration. This points to a continuity in local power, particularly in the Orchard Heartland, where most of these figures sit. Of the 51 figures who rebelled, left politics, or showed intergenerational adjustment, 36 are in the Orchard Heartland and 11 in the Gia Định Core. A closer look at the Gia Định Core figures shows that all but two came from Tân An, the liminal province straddling the Vaico river that separates the two zones. Counting Tân An in the Orchard Heartland would place 49 of the 51 figures in the central Mekong provinces.

A similar correlation between continuity in local power, the Orchard Heartland, and *Talking Business* appears in the analysis of patronage, which I define as "contributing personal resources to an institution of civic benefit." Ninety-eight figures appear as patrons. I sort the patronage into five categories. Local power, the most numerous at 55 individuals, includes patronage of schools, local infrastructure, Confucian and Daoist temples of village ritual importance, and particularly in the far western provinces, the founding or renovation of whole villages and markets. Literature and art patronage is next at 23 and covers anyone the text notes as supporting or contributing to

the field, even when the arts were not the figure's primary career. Outside these two groupings, 9 figures patronized religious institutions — defined as Buddhist pagodas and Catholic churches not integral to village governance in the way Confucian institutions were. Seven figures were patrons of business and philanthropy, and four were historical patrons of Nguyễn Anh's campaigns in the Mekong Delta during the Tây Sơn Wars.



The bar chart above shows the distribution of these figures across the four subregions. Most local-power figures (35 of 55) appear in the Orchard Heartland. Nguyễn Liên Phong's sampling method is unsystematic enough that I cannot read this as the relative density of founder and renovator figures among local elites; the surviving paterfamilias of village founders would in any case hold ceremonial *hương cả* [village ritual elder] positions in perpetuity. The distribution does imply, however, that Nguyễn Liên Phong encountered figures associated with founder lineages more often on his travels. The Literature and Art category is also telling, not for what it says about the regional ratio of patrons but for the skew: two-thirds of entries are split evenly between Bến Tre and Saigon. Bến Tre's share comes entirely from an extended section on *Talking Business*. That this section features in the Orchard Heartland rather than in Saigon, where the paper was owned, written, and printed, ties *Talking Business* to the Orchard Heartland. The figures named there include Pre-WWI literary celebrities Nguyễn Chánh Sắc (also spelled Sắt), Nguyễn An Khương, Đặng Thúc Liêng, Nguyễn Khắc Huê, Trần Chánh Chiểu, Lương Khắc Ninh, and Lê Văn Trung. Only half of these figures are from Bến Tre, but the paper's center of gravity in the Orchard Heartland pulls the others along with it, making Bến Tre province one of the two poles of literary importance.

Generational continuity in *Verses of Homage*

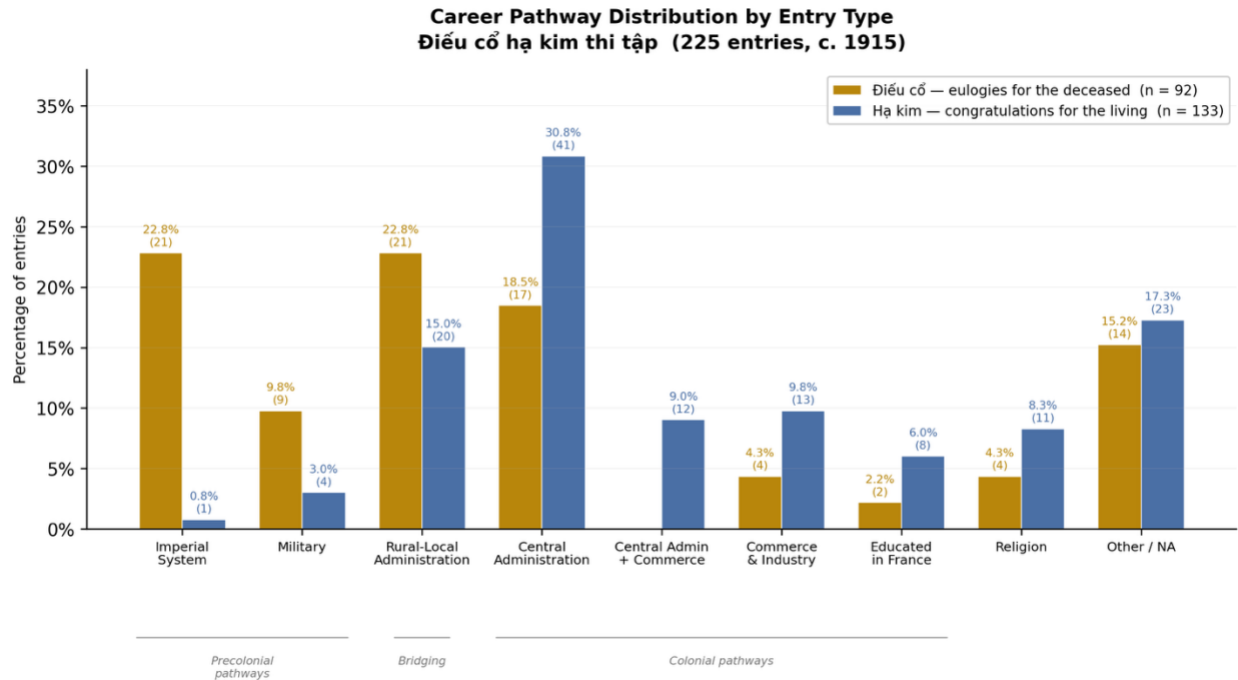
Nguyễn Liên Phong's companion text, *Verses of Homage*, provides a more structured body of evidence for the same generational and geographic patterns the verse gazetteer suggested.¹⁶¹ Published in 1915, *Verses of Homage* is a biographical dictionary of 228 entries devoted to individuals and families whom Phong considered the most notable figures of the South. Each entry includes a heptasyllabic regulated verse poem of praise alongside a prose description

¹⁶¹ Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Điếu Cổ Hạ Kim Thi Tập*.

recording career information, family background, hometown, awards, language competencies, religious affiliation, and kinship ties. I tabulated attributes for each identifiable individual mentioned in or across entries, yielding a dataset of 580 figures.

Verses of Homage is explicitly structured around a principle of elite continuity, a thesis which was also advanced, albeit less directly, over the course of *Figures and Folkways*. The text is organized around a generational argument and is broken into two parts. *Điếu cổ* [eulogizing the ancients] are verse tributes to the deceased and include 92 entries memorializing men and women whose careers began under the Nguyễn dynasty or during the tumultuous decades of the French conquest and early colonial consolidation. *Hạ kim* [celebrating the present] are verse tributes to the living and feature 133 entries celebrating individuals alive at the time of composition. Because the *Điếu cổ* records figures of the transitional generation and the *Hạ kim* records the generation that came of age under the stabilized civilian regime, the two halves of the text track how the elite reproduced itself across the colonial divide. The text also provides more relational data than *Figures and Folkways*: 355 additional figures are mentioned within entries, and 128 of the 228 entries contain multiple identifiable individuals.

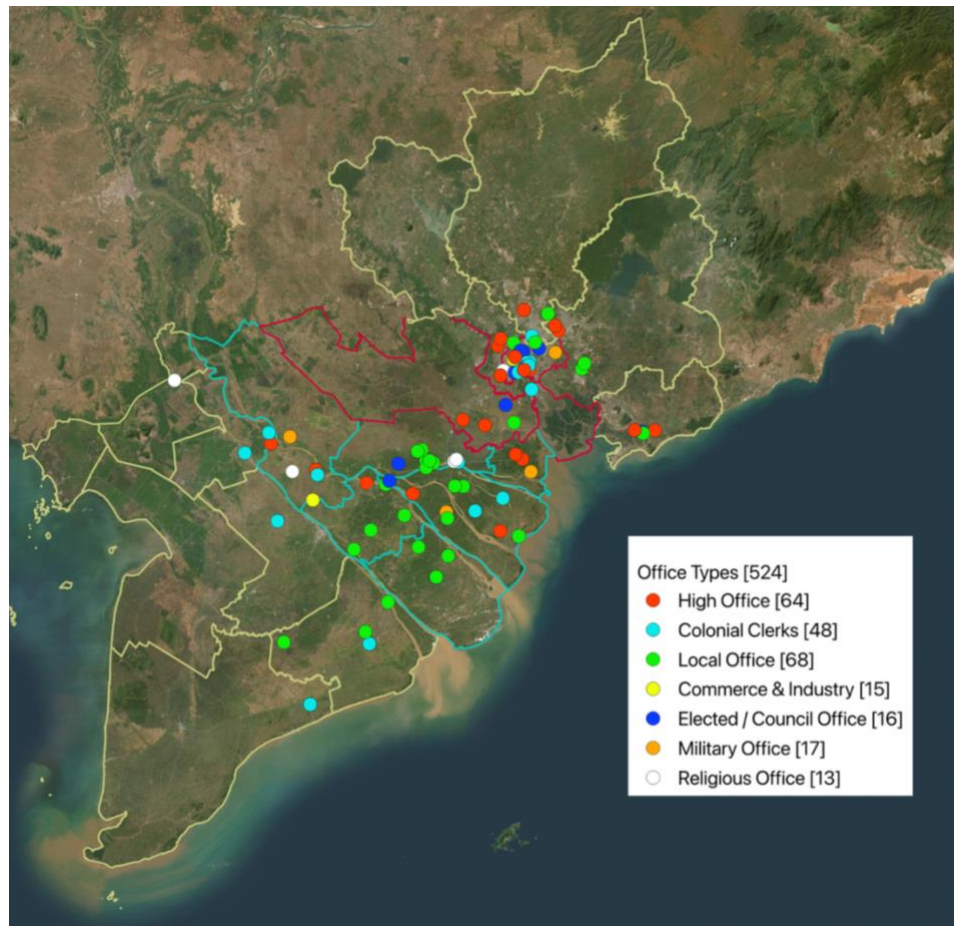
Comparing this generational information to the career pathways taken by elite individuals reveals a transition from Imperial and Military careers to a more diverse, but chiefly civilian administrative route. I classified each figure's career trajectory based on Nguyễn Liên Phong's annotations: central colonial administration (interpreters, clerks, and officials in provincial and colony-wide ministries), rural-local administration (canton chiefs, village headmen, and neighborhood-level positions elected by local councils of notables), imperial system (figures who held Nguyễn-era ranks or positions and whose notability rested on imperial service), military (Nguyễn and colonial armed forces), commerce and industry, France-educated (here meaning educated abroad), and religious vocations. Among the *Điếu cổ*, the Imperial System accounts for 22.8% of entries and military careers for 9.8%, marking a generation the Nguyễn state and its military apparatus had formed. Among the *Hạ kim*, these pathways nearly vanish: 0.8% and 3.0% respectively. In their place, central colonial administration accounts for 30.8%, commerce and industry for 11.3%, France-educated careers for 6.0%, and combined administration-commerce pathways for 8.3%. These figures form the new class of colonial functionaries who built their careers through the Franco-Indigenous schools, the interpreters' bureaus, the colonial courts, and the new commercial economy. The continuity in elite composition is equally striking: rural-local administration, which depends not on educational attainment but on the support of village oligarchies and on managing communal feasts and rites, remains the second most common trajectory in both generations — 22.8% of the *Điếu cổ* and 15.0% of the *Hạ kim*. Bureaucratic careers grew more popular, but local rural office remained the elite's second-largest avenue before the First World War.



A concern for continuity is also visible in Nguyễn Liên Phong's rhetorical strategy for framing the contemporary elite as heirs rather than newcomers. Among the *Hạ kim* entries, 26.3% include explicit annotations on the subject's aristocratic family background, compared to only 7.6% of the *Điều cổ*. Furthermore, the aristocrats appearing in *Điều cổ* section include settler forefathers from the distant past, like Nguyễn Hữu Cảnh and Mạc Thiên Tứ. These men are included as a rhetorical gesture to establish historical continuity rather than for their relation to the current elite. The asymmetry suggests that, by the time of Nguyễn Liên Phong's writing, a sizable cohort of old-lineage families had rallied to colonial accommodation. Their forebears had not been first-generation collaborators, and they therefore needed the genealogical legitimation that the *Điều cổ* figures, already established as notables, did not. Some annotations are unusually specific. Bùi Quang Chiêu, who would go on to found the Constitutionalist Party, is identified as *gốc dòng khoa hoạn trâm anh*—of a distinguished lineage of examination graduates and officeholders. The entry for Võ Thành Báu, a *Đốc phủ sứ* from Chợ Lớn province, traces an aristocratic lineage four generations back through the Nguyễn administration: his great-grandfather Võ Đăng Phú served as *Án Sát*, his grandfather Võ Thành Phong as *Bố Chánh*, his uncle Võ Thành Nhơn as *Tuần Phủ*. Nguyễn Minh Diệm, a traditional medicine seller in Thị Nghè, explicitly notes his ancestor as *khoa mục cựu trào*—an examination graduate of the old regime.

This genealogical commentary reflects Phong's insistence that the transition between political orders did not break the social order. Similar signs of continuity are seen in the fact that, for a significant minority of entries, an accommodationist response to colonization can be inferred. Twenty-one figures rallied directly to the French conquest, and eight took up gentlemanly reclusion. As in *Figures and Folkways*, the recluses are the most interesting category. All eight were Nguyễn officials, six were from the Orchard Heartland, and one, Phạm Chánh, helped lead the refurbishing of Lê Văn Duyệt's temple. Two features are surprising. First, only 21 entries (roughly 10%) owe their status to rallying to colonization, suggesting its relative unimportance to elite formation. The figure understates the matter, however: those 21 included some of the

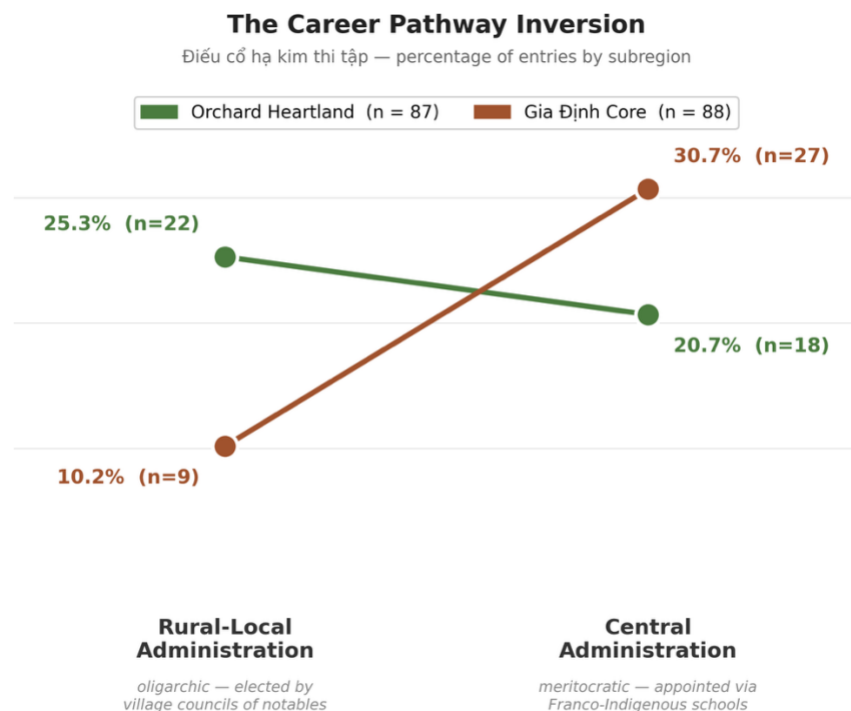
wealthiest and most powerful Vietnamese in the turn-of-the-century colony, such as the Trần Bá and Lê Phát clans, whose marriages and partnerships ran through the rest of the elite. Second, the gentlemen-recluses include some of the mandarins who fled the French conquest, and these men continued as active members of the elite during the colonial era. Therefore, although the flight of the mandarins shaped the new administrative and legal regime along French lines, the old elite largely adapted to the new colonial world.



When the 225 entries are distributed across the subregions identified in the preceding analysis, the same two poles of attention emerge. The Gia Định Core (red provincial borders) accounts for 88 entries (39.1%) and the Orchard Heartland (blue provincial borders) for 87 (38.7%). The Western Fringe contributes 21 entries (9.3%), the Eastern Fringe 19 (8.4%), and areas outside Cochinchina 10 (4.4%). Both *Điếu cỗ* and *Hạ kim* show this same dual concentration: the Orchard Heartland accounts for 38.0% of *Điếu cỗ* and 39.1% of *Hạ kim*; the Gia Định Core for 34.8% and 42.1% respectively.

A characteristic inversion appears when career types are mapped over the colony. Orchard Heartland entries are disproportionately associated with rural-local administration—the oligarchic, kin-based pathway in which canton chiefs were elected by delegates from village councils of notables, and in which authority rested on deep local roots, lineage prestige, and the management of communal ritual rather than French educational credentials. Gia Định Core entries, by contrast, are disproportionately associated with central colonial administration and ministerial employment—the meritocratic, school-based pathway dependent on graduation from

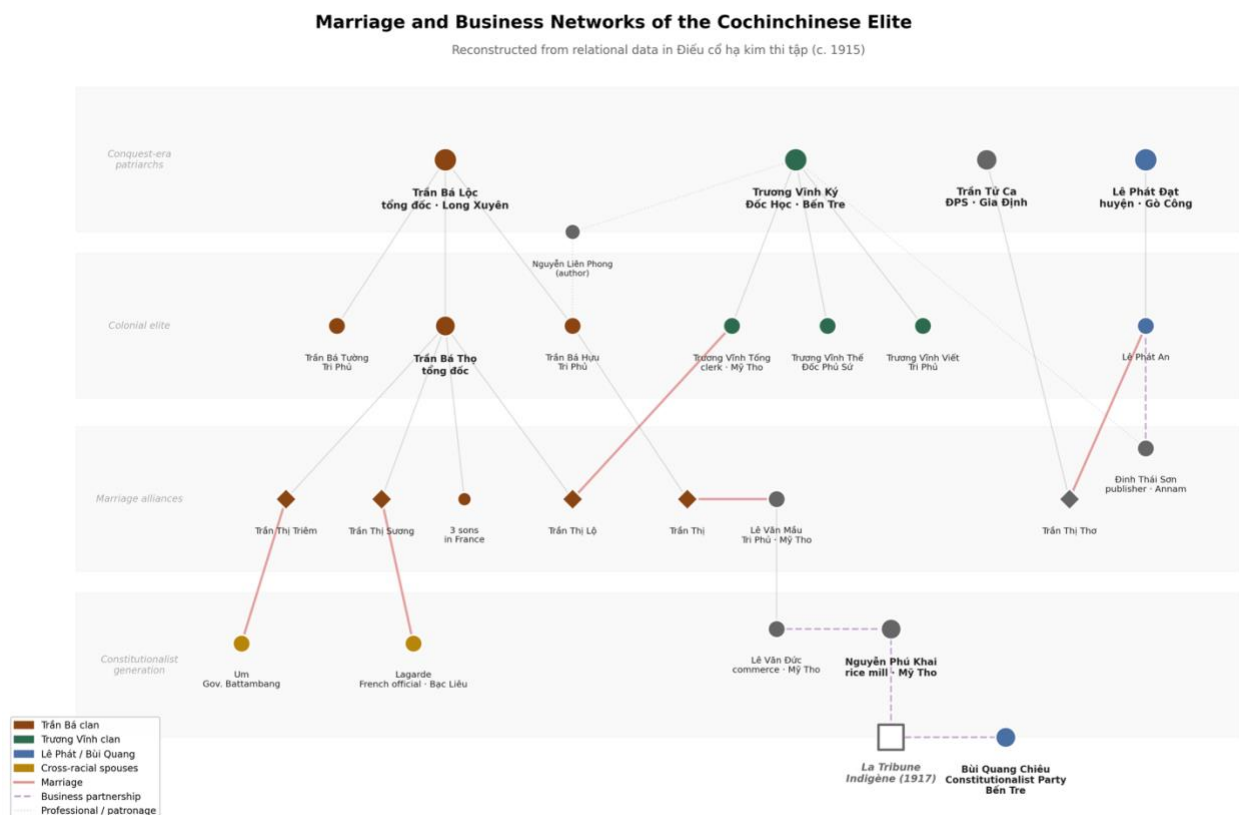
Franco-Indigenous institutions and appointment through the interpreters' bureaus. This is the same structural inversion identified through the figure types in *Figures and Folkways*, where local office holders clustered in the Heartland while clerical workers clustered around the capital. The two pathways coexisted within the same political bloc, linked in various ways, but resting on fundamentally different social bases. The persistence of the local administration pathway in the Orchard Heartland is the structural foundation of elite continuity. It is also the social base upon which the anti-Chinese commercial mobilization examined in subsequent chapters would be built: it was precisely these provincial canton chiefs, village headmen, and their sons who would form the shareholder lists, founding boards, and grassroots constituency of the Minh Tân movement of 1907–1908 profiled in chapter seven.



Finally, the kinship and partnership information embedded in the *Verses of Homage* entries shows how the elite held together. One extended network shows how marriage and business partnerships bound the first generation of colonial collaborators to interwar-era notables. Trần Bá Lộc, the early collaborator from Long Xuyên, had several sons, including Trần Bá Thọ, the honorary tổng đốc and Colonial Councilor whose endorsement poem appeared earlier in this chapter. Trần Bá Thọ married twice and raised a large family whose marriages reached across the colony. One daughter, Trần Thị Lộ, married Trương Vĩnh Tổng, a son of the illustrious Trương Vĩnh Ký of Bến Tre—thereby cementing an alliance between two of the most powerful first-generation collaborator dynasties. Other daughters cemented alliances across racial lines: Trần Thị Triêm married Um, the Cambodian governor of Battambang, and Trần Thị Sương married Lagarde, a French official in Bạc Liêu.

Other branches of the Trần Bá clan extended through the colony in similar ways. Trần Bá Thọ's brother Trần Bá Hựu, killed in the 1885 riots, had an unnamed daughter who married the Orchard Heartland high official Lê Văn Mầu. Lê Văn Mầu's son Lê Văn Đức became a commercial partner of Nguyễn Phú Khai, the Mỹ Tho rice magnate who established the first

Vietnamese rice-milling operation and later co-founded the newspaper *La Tribune Indigène* with Bùi Quang Chiêu, launching the Constitutionalist Party. The Trần Bá line connected laterally to the Lê Phát clan of Gò Công. The patriarch Lê Phát Đạt was reputed to be the wealthiest Vietnamese in the colony, and his family intersects this network through his son Lê Phát An's marriage to Trần Thị Thơ, granddaughter of the collaborator Trần Tử Ca, who, like Trần Bá Hựu, died in the 1885 riots. These marriages tied the first generation of colonial collaborators to the founders of Vietnamese print capitalism: Lê Phát An partnered with Đinh Thái Sơn, the Annamese-born publisher Trương Vĩnh Ký had earlier patronized. These alliances show how the geographic, generational, and career range I documented in the preceding paragraphs held together as a coherent political grouping. In this one kinship web I can trace the path from the conquest-era military collaborators of the 1860s, through the Orchard Heartland gentry of the turn of the century, to the founding of the Constitutionalist Party in the late 1910s. The political implications of these networks, and how they would undermine the business movement, are the subject of chapter nine.



Verses of Homage corroborates the portrait in *Figures and Folkways* and adds three dimensions the verse gazetteer could not. First, the text's generational structure tracks how elite career strategies transformed across the colonial watershed and shows that the shift from imperial to colonial institutional affiliations did not break elite social power. Career-pathway and location data also show that rural-local administration remained the dominant avenue into the elite in the Orchard Heartland — an avenue resting on oligarchic authority rather than French educational credentials. Second, Nguyễn Liên Phong insisted on aristocratic family commentary in the biographies, framing the contemporary elite as heirs to a genealogy of Confucian virtue that preceded the colonial state. Third, the relational data in the entries shows the networks that

bound the elite's different constituencies into a coherent political grouping. What emerges is an overlooked provincial elite that adapted its career strategies to colonial institutions while holding its social power through kinship, local administration, and cultivation of ancestral virtue.

Conclusion

Historians of Cochinchina have not seriously examined the first Vietnamese business newspaper, which was also the first successful privately-owned Vietnamese periodical: *Talking Business*. Milton Osborne closes his study of Cochinchina by briefly mentioning the paper as "the first really important unofficial quoc-ngu newspaper," one that contributed to the "qualified triumph" of the Latin script, but skips the first five years of its existence and addresses only Gilbert Chiếu's brief tenure as chief editor in 1906.¹⁶² Philippe Peycam, whose monograph focuses on the interwar period, writes extensively on *Talking Business*'s role in the teens and twenties but incorrectly attributes its founding to Gilbert Chiếu, likewise missing the paper's first five years.¹⁶³ When I reviewed the first years of the paper, I was struck by its political tone and by the figures who appeared to voice their support for Lương Khắc Ninh's political project, a project and a network of figures that earlier accounts of the colony have largely ignored.

Subsequent chapters take up that political project and the ideological themes its intelligentsia developed. In this chapter, I have worked to grasp the character of the new elite, turning to the seldom-referenced texts *Figures and Folkways* and *Verses of Homage*, written by early *Talking Business* contributor Nguyễn Liên Phong. Read alongside *Talking Business*, Nguyễn Liên Phong's oeuvre overturns the assumption that the retreat of the mandarins produced a radical break with the old Confucian elite.

By tabulating features of *Figures and Folkways*, I have shown that otherwise anomalous aspects of the text follow from the continuity of a precolonial elite in the Orchard Heartland. But why did this elite rally to the colonial regime at the turn of the century, and not previously? In the next chapter, I will analyze other aspects of these texts to understand this elite bloc's worldview. There, I argue that the turn-of-the-century coincidence of the Franco-Nguyễn Détente, the construction of electoral institutions, Vietnamese print capitalism, and the business boom behind Doumer's fiscal reforms brought this old gentry back into political prominence. In this chapter, the geographic distribution of the intelligentsia who featured in and endorsed the two texts, together with the Nguyễn sovereign's open support for Nguyễn Liên Phong and for his patron Đinh Thái Sơn, showed that a sphere of Confucian gentility lay at the root of the Vietnamese public sphere. Having mapped some features of the previously hidden Orchard Heartland gentry, the next chapter takes up the chief themes of their worldview to show how Nguyễn Liên Phong understood colonial accommodation as an extension of a centuries-long Vietnamese civilizing effort.

¹⁶² Osborne, *The French Presence*... p168

¹⁶³ Philippe Peycam, *The Birth of Vietnamese Political Journalism: Saigon 1916-1930*, (Columbia University Press, 2012)

Figures and Folkways and the Cochinchinese Elite's Worldview before the First World War

The previous chapter explored the character of the turn-of-the-century Cochinchinese elite through an analysis of folklorist Nguyễn Liên Phong's verse gazetteer *Figures and Folkways* (1909) and his biographical dictionary *Verses of Homage* (1915).¹⁶⁴ Although scholars contend that the “retreat of the mandarins” during the colonial conquest of Cochinchina in the 1860s entailed the rise of a new elite, evidence from Nguyễn Liên Phong's works shows continuity between the precolonial and colonial elite. Similarly, although “the retreat of the mandarins” severed Cochinchina from formal Nguyễn administrative authority, it did not erase the emotional and ideological bonds connecting the region's Vietnamese population to the imperial court in Huế. Contra the conventional historiography, the colonial conquest did not stage a “minor social revolution” and catapult a deracinated precolonial underclass to new positions of authority as colonial brokers.¹⁶⁵ Instead, members of the Orchard Heartland gentry filled the ranks of the elite. Far from deracinated, these men jealously guarded their family legacies and their participation in a tradition of Confucian gentility. The old Mekong elite retained its social standing, dominated the early *quốc ngữ* public sphere and drove the agenda for its ideological outlet, the Saigon newspaper *Talking Business over Tea* [*Nông cổ mín đàm*].

To understand this elite's world view, this chapter supplements the quantitative analysis provided in the previous chapter with a qualitative discussion of the major themes offered in *Figures and Folkways*. As discussed in chapter three, the text breaks from the conventions of the gazetteer genre to adopt a verse form, moralizing tone, and didactic purpose. These peculiarities allow for an ideological reading to the text, opening a window onto the worldview of the antebellum elite. To put the problem directly, by applying a traditional literary and geographical form to modern colonial conditions, Nguyễn Liên Phong grapples with squaring a conventional ideological orientation with the fact of French colonial domination. I find that Nguyễn Liên Phong accomplishes this by placing the colonial elite and their society into a historical continuum with Nguyễn-led Confucian civilizational expansion and settler colonization of the Mekong Delta. To do so, he is forced to specify novel themes of legitimation that account for Vietnamese political subjection to French colonial authority, as well as economic and cultural subordination to Chinese immigrants.

The text poses many challenges to the historian. For one, Nguyễn Liên Phong's verse form makes analysis difficult: the narration jumps from one locale to another, touching on landmarks and personages, and interweaving historical tales with magical happenings. It is also loosely structured. Scenes shift imperceptibly to new persons or locales, making the narrative difficult to

¹⁶⁴ Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Nam kỳ Phong tục Nhơn vật Điển ca Chủ thích*; Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Điếu Cổ Hạ Kim Thi Tập*. These citations correspond to Cao Tự Thanh's helpful annotated editions. However, as part of his editing process he adjusted spelling to correspond to modern conventions. Luckily the original 1909 text of *Figures and Folkways* is freely available online and has been transcribed into a Wikisource for ease of reading. I used the Wikisource for my original coding, and all quotes of the original text here correspond to the Wikisource text available at: Nguyễn Liên Phong, “Nam Kỳ phong tục nhơn vật điển ca – Wikisource tiếng Việt,” accessed March 25, 2026,

https://vi.wikisource.org/wiki/Nam_K%E1%BB%B3_phong_t%E1%BB%A5c_nh%C6%A1n_v%E1%BA%ADt_d%E1%BB%85n_ca.

¹⁶⁵ This characterization, and the “minor social revolution” are taken from Woodside, *Community and Revolution in Modern Vietnam*.

follow. To make sense of the text, I divided each chapter into sections and coded them by topic. The coding process allowed me to infer and tabulate four legitimizing themes that recur throughout the text: 1) virtuous conduct and orderly space; 2) Nguyễn loyalty; 3) harmonious ethnic relations; and 4) technological and commercial extension of the precolonial Vietnamese civilizational project.

Virtuous Conduct and Ordered Spaces

Wild spaces

Figures and Folkways' chief organizing principle is orderly space and virtuous conduct. The text does not show an expected preference for conservative and traditional rural spaces over disordered and hybrid urban spaces. Instead, moral flourishing follows from good governance and institutional coordination, which is spread unevenly over both urban and rural space, instead of correlated directly to town and country. Nguyễn Liên Phong thereby associates order and vitality with both traditional customs and French colonial modernity. Correspondingly, he frequently characterizes rural spaces as disordered zones.

Furthermore, no province or subregion stands out as significantly more associated with positive or negative moods, and criticisms are generally rarer than praise. Nevertheless, his criticisms reveal the importance of well-ordered institutions. Nguyễn Liên Phong associates wild spaces, which lack institutional coordination, with disorderly phenomena such as dangerous animals, criminals, poverty and desolation. This is the case across Western Fringe, Orchard Heartland, Gia Định Core, and the Eastern Fringe—the four subregions identified in chapter three.¹⁶⁶

For example, in the Eastern Fringe province of Biên Hoà, Nguyễn Liên Phong contrasts the well-tapped natural resources of the Vietnamese lands, with their ordered schools and transportation infrastructure, against the desolation and poverty of the “savage tribes” [*mọi*] scattered in the hills.¹⁶⁷ Likewise, at the edge of the Đồng Tháp swamp, which forms the northern boundary of the Orchard Heartland, wild spaces provide refuge for bandits.

At Mỹ Hạnh village on the hillock, the buffalo herders come and go.
Bandits from all around come to hide their wares.
Though one attempt an ambush, on four sides sit empty fields.
Lookouts see your charge and scurry off, saying “who dare pursue us.”¹⁶⁸

This contrasts with the way Nguyễn Liên Phong depicts civilization as a process of transforming zones of bestial disorder into well-ordered habitats. For example, he introduces the Western

¹⁶⁶ The Western Fringe includes the provinces west of the Hậu River. The Orchard Heartland includes the provinces between the Hậu and the Vàm Cỏ/ Vaico orientale, inclusive of Gò Công. The Gia Định Core includes Chợ Lớn Province, Gia Định Province, Tân An Province, and the twin cities of Saigon-Cholon, and the eastern fringe includes the provinces abutting the foothills of the southern reaches of the Annamite cordillera: Tây Ninh, Thủ Dầu Một, Biên Hoà, Bà Rịa.

¹⁶⁷ “Trời sanh phong thổ toan tân, Đủ ăn đủ bận ngày lần tháng qua./ Chẳng hề lãng phí xa ba, Tôn ty đẳng cấp phải mà dưới trên./ Học thời chánh phụ hai bên, Trường quan trường tổng dạy nên cũng nhiều./ Sáu tổng dân Mọi liêu hiêu, Cửa nhà rải rác bao nhiêu sang giàu.” Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Nam kỳ Phong tục Nhơn vật Diễn ca Chủ thích*, 87.

¹⁶⁸ “Ở làng Mỹ-hạnh giữa gò, Ra vô những trẻ chăn bò chăn trâu./ Thường khi trộm cướp đầu đầu, Đem đồ tan vật tới âu ở nhờ./ Dầu ai mạch chỉ tình cờ, Tư bề trống trải coi bờ quanh không./ Dòm coi biết ý thẳng xông, Trón qua chỗ khác ai hòng bắt ta.” Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Nam kỳ Phong tục Nhơn vật Diễn ca Chủ thích*, 313.

Fringe province of Rạch Giá, “[it] was once Kiến Giang, part of Hà Tiên, jungle on all sides. Back then it was a desolate rural land, now it’s a city, polished and refined.”¹⁶⁹ Wilderness and menacing animals likewise appear together in Cần Thơ, where, the land was flooded and elephants trampled the rice crops. The Vietnamese dug canals and slaughtered the elephants, selling their ivory at great profit — a transformation Nguyễn Liên Phong frames as the forward march of civilization.¹⁷⁰ Nguyễn Liên Phong meanwhile portrays rural western Chợ Lớn province as a place of crocodile-filled waters and bandit hideouts.¹⁷¹ He invokes a similar relationship to summarize the transformation of Bạc Liêu,

Bạc Liêu, a land largely left fallow, was once a small district, then slowly grew.
Tumults of The Heaven and Earth Society, sons of the Chinese there battled.
It was merged with Cà Mau, a new district to safeguard from chaos.
Now an orderly town, dignified residences, bustling markets, in all directions neatly arranged.¹⁷²

The problem with wild spaces is not their emptiness *per se*, but rather their unregulated character. Nguyễn Liên Phong also criticizes urban spaces for disorder yet champions them when they serve as venues for harmony, excellence, and wealth: a relationship made clear in his depiction of urban vice.

Urban vice

Nguyễn Liên Phong's attitudes toward crime, prostitution, and rebellion in the text well illustrate his ambivalence toward urban disorder and harmony. In Chợ Lớn city, tattooed gangs brandish clubs and machetes, and fight in the streets over gambling operations. These men take no heed of colonial law, and “view Saigon central prison as though it were their home”.¹⁷³ Contrast this with an image from the Gia Định chapter describing areas that today fall within the southern districts of Hồ Chí Minh City

Phú Xuân a land of great beauty, Thủ Thiêm, Xóm Chiếu more town than country.

¹⁶⁹ “Rạch-giá nguyên huyện Kiên-giang, Thuộc Hà-tiên tỉnh rừng hoan tư bề./Xưa kia hieu quanh xứ quê, Bây giờ thành phố chỉnh tề sửa sang.” Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Nam kỳ Phong tục Nhơn vật Diển ca Chủ thích*, 391.

¹⁷⁰ “Rừng sậy phần tổng Định-hòa, Mười ba thôn xã xứ mà lắm voi./Nguyên xưa đất rộng hẳn hoi, Kinh chưa đào mở rạch ngòi chưa thông./Qua mùa nước ngập mình mông, Voi trên sông lớn xuống rồng bắn ngàn./Lâu lâu quen ở đã an, Dăm bờ đập lúa cả đoàn hơn trăm./ Kinh đào đường mở mấy năm, Xà-no, Đông-lợi, Láng-hàm, Ô-môn./ Lũ voi sanh đẻ dập dồn, Các ông thợ bắn các thôn hiệp vây./ Biết bao công cán nặng dày, Bốn mươi dư thớt bắn rầy mới an./ Ngà voi bán có bạc ngàn, Lại thêm trừ bớt khôn nản nhà nông./ Càng ngày thêm thanh thêm sung, Nhảy tràng hột lúa lưu thông Nam-kỳ” Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Nam kỳ Phong tục Nhơn vật Diển ca Chủ thích*, 376.

¹⁷¹ “Đường sông có sáu cũng nhiều, Bởi vì thanh vắng quanh hiều tư bề./ Ranh đất Gò-công giáp kề, Theo bờ đồng ruộng ngó mê cả ngàn./ Lắm quân trộm cướp tìm tàng, Các nơi chủ chứa trong làng thiếu chi.” Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Nam kỳ Phong tục Nhơn vật Diển ca Chủ thích*, 230.

¹⁷² “Bạc-liêu đất lắm hoan nhân, Nguyên xưa tiêu Huyện mở mang lần lần./ Bởi Thiên-địa-hội rần rần, Góc con cháu khách lầy lừng đánh nhau./ Cho nên nhập với Cà-mau, Lập riêng một hạt khỏi âu dân loạn./ Nay đã dinh dẫy nghiêm trang, Phố phường chợ búa dọc ngang chỉnh tề.” Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Nam kỳ Phong tục Nhơn vật Diển ca Chủ thích*, 369.

¹⁷³ “Lắm khi làng phí chẳng màng, Gặp con bài bạc trăm ngàn sá bao./ Đánh đề với đánh bài cào, Chẳng kiên quắc cầm ra vào nghinh ngang./ Du-côn lắm kẻ bạo tàn, Xanh quanh Chợ-lớn nhảy tràng đảng phe./ Trong mình thích tự không ghê, Cù chì, tay sắc, lười lê, dòm rình./ Thừa cơ ngộ sự bất bình, Hừng hừng nổi giận đánh inh giữa trời./ Ruồi may chết sống như chơi, Cõi nơi Khâm-lớn ví nơi cửa nhà.” Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Nam kỳ Phong tục Nhơn vật Diển ca Chủ thích*, 233.

The people here are content, not rich, but still worry free.
Pass the time with tea and wine, cockfighting, gambling, and many street prostitutes.¹⁷⁴

Here, Nguyễn Liên Phong frames a scene the reader might expect to be associated with vice and crime – prostitution, gambling and cockfighting-- as a scene of beauty and contentment. This ambivalence appears with greater force in the urban spaces of Saigon-Cholon. For example, Nguyễn Liên Phong draws a negative contrast between Vietnamese prostitutes who work out of hovels and swarm onto the street at night and the more professional Japanese sex workers, who bring their clients to clean rooms in multistory buildings.¹⁷⁵ In another passage, he laments that “women from all over the colony deliver themselves adrift to the pleasures of Saigon.” Though he thinks they are redeemed by learning French and thereby transform themselves into refined ladies.

The most extensive and revealing prostitution scene appears in the Chinatown of Chợ Lớn, where a red-light district abuts theaters and street entertainment near today's Phan Đình Phùng Roundabout in the 13th ward of District 5 of Ho Chi Minh City. Nguyễn Liên Phong admires the singing, the crowds and the goods for sale, before shifting focus to brothels staffed by Japanese and Cantonese women. However, his positive tone shifts as he contemplates the spread of sexually transmitted disease. “The cost isn’t very high, for a handful of coins you can risk it all”. He blames the risk on the dishonesty of the girls and their pimps, who dodge taxes and hide symptoms of syphilis from medical screenings, contributing to an epidemic of venereal disease. The colonial state meanwhile shares the blame for being too merciful, unwilling to cart off the sickly and confine them in the hospital.¹⁷⁶

Nguyễn Liên Phong’s criticisms of prostitution arise neither from a puritan concern with a sinful engagement in non-reproductive sex, nor a stoic anxiety about the over-indulgence in passions, though this does appear as a risk to refined gentlemen.¹⁷⁷ Instead, prostitution becomes a problem when it spills beyond the bounds of governance or falls short of the standards of excellence set by its best practitioners.

¹⁷⁴ “Phú-xuân địa cảnh rất xinh, Thủ-thiên, Xóm-chiếu Châu-thành chẳng quê./Nhon dân sanh ý no nê, Không giàu sang mấy mà bề thành thời./ Tục hay trà rượu ăn chơi, Đấu kê đồ bát lăm nơi điểm đường.” Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Nam kỳ Phong tục Nhon vật Diển ca Chú thích*, 131.

¹⁷⁵ “An-nam phố thấp ở trằng, Tỏi ra kéo niều dọc ngang cùng đường.” Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Nam kỳ Phong tục Nhon vật Diển ca Chú thích*, 192.

¹⁷⁶ “E khi bệnh hoạn không chừng, Có Quan thầy-thuốc mỗi tuần lục xi./ Mấy con lo lậu bắt kì, Đi hoan trốn thuế lăm khi tiếm tàn./ Tú-bà phỉn đồ khôn ngoan, Trau tria nhan sắc coi càng thêm duyên./ Khách sang rước chơ đầy thuyền, Miễn cho đẹp ý bạc tiền sá chi./ Lắm trang nho nhả nam nhi, Ngờ là vưu vật khả di nhon tình./ Ai dè nó quá phong tình, Đa dâm uế trực cả mình không kiên./ Rủi ro độc khí nhiễm truyền, Dương-mai bệnh phát khốn điên có ngày./

Bởi vì không có quan thầy, Không ai xem xét nên rầy sanh đau./Tuần do ngăn đón trước sau, Thằng bắt con gái tróc câu dẫn về./ Chủ hoa chực lãnh tư bề, Đứa mô có bệnh đem về nhà-thương./ Nước nhà phép nhặc chiêu chương, Chẳng kiên chẳng sợ cứ vương vấn hoài./ Độc truyền cả gái cả trai, Biết đâu mà chuột thuốc bài trừ căn.” Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Nam kỳ Phong tục Nhon vật Diển ca Chú thích*, 213.

¹⁷⁷ Particularly the line “Many refined gentlemen of noble bearing think they have found the prize of their desires, who could guess they’d lose themselves to passion, unable to abstain, even at the cost of defiling themselves.” [Lắm trang nho nhả nam nhi, Ngờ là vưu vật khả di nhon tình./ Ai dè nó quá phong tình, Đa dâm uế trực cả mình không kiên.] Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Nam kỳ Phong tục Nhon vật Diển ca Chú thích*, 213.

Rebellion or Banditry: The Anomalous case of Trương Định

The previous sections showed that Nguyễn Liên Phong's depiction of Cochinchina did not conform to an expected preference for traditional rural Vietnamese spaces over modern hybrid urban spaces. Instead, he evaluated both urban and rural spaces according to the penetration of governance and the presence of excellence. He praised spaces characterized by ordered governance and talented craftspeople, no matter whether they were rural or urban, Vietnamese or non-Vietnamese. Analyzing his characterization of space is important because, as mentioned above, Nguyễn Liên Phong is grappling with the dilemma of applying a traditional form of geographic writing, which has a didactic and moralizing dimension, to modern colonial spaces, forcing him to articulate a value system that can encompass both.

The same dilemma characterizes Nguyễn Liên Phong's treatment of rebellion and banditry. Should historical Vietnamese opponents of the French colonial conquest be praised as rebels or denounced as bandits? Accustomed to scholarly treatments that depict banditry in Robin Hood terms as a struggle between anticolonial "social bandits" employing "weapons of the weak," and whom the superior power delegitimizes as criminals, one might expect Nguyễn Liên Phong, as a bard for the reputedly sycophantic collaborator elite, to side with the colonial state against insurrectionists.¹⁷⁸ But this is not always the case. He condemns many rebels as bandits, yet he praises those who plausibly acted in accordance with the higher virtues of aristocratic loyalty and masculine daring, despite their formal illegality.

Nguyễn Liên Phong's ambivalent treatment of rebellion has fueled debate among Vietnamese scholars over whether he harbored secret anti-colonial intentions.¹⁷⁹ But I argue his ambivalence should instead be understood as a way to navigate the dual loyalties of the Franco-Nguyễn Détente and fashion a worldview for the elite bloc formed after the Orchard Heartland gentry accommodated to the colonial project. Put plainly, Nguyễn Liên Phong needed to construct a history of the conquest that encompassed both the early French collaborators and old Nguyễn loyalists whose sons and daughters have accepted the new regime. His ambivalence is most visible in the case of Trương Định, a Vietnamese military commander who led the most formidable armed resistance against the French conquest of Cochinchina in the early 1860s.

First, a brief description of his more conventional depictions of rebellion and banditry will bring into relief what is distinctive about his treatment of Trương Định. To Nguyễn Liên Phong, political disorder often arises from the incomplete penetration of governing and ritual institutions, leaving zones controlled by bandits. For example, in the far western province of Bạc Liêu the weakness of Confucian learning contributes to the power of Chinese criminal organizations.¹⁸⁰ In some parts of Saigon, gang vendettas erupt so frequently that he begs the

¹⁷⁸ Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Social Bandits and Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (Free Press, 1960); James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (Yale University Press, 1985); Tai, *Millenarianism and Peasant Politics in Vietnam*.

¹⁷⁹ Vietnamese scholars have debated whether Nguyễn Liên Phong harbored covert anti-colonial sympathies. The question turns on passages like the Trương Định eulogy and the karmic punishment of Huỳnh Công Tấn's son, which seem difficult to reconcile with the work of a straightforward colonial apologist. The reading advanced here — that Phong's praise of Trương Định is consistent with, rather than subversive of, his broader Franco-Nguyễn Détente cosmology — does not require positing secret intentions. See the introduction in Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Nam kỳ Phong tục Nhơn vật Diễn ca Chú thích*.

¹⁸⁰ Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Nam kỳ Phong tục Nhơn vật Diễn ca Chú thích*, 367.

state to intervene.¹⁸¹ Some spaces are characterized by a long tradition of banditry. For example, the Eighteen Betel Grove region of Hóc Môn, where rebels murdered collaborator Trần Tử Ca in 1885, is a “prickly and unruly region” which has “abandoned the national interest”.¹⁸² Other times he blames rebellion on ambitious or greedy rebel leaders. For example, an 1885 rebellion in Mỹ Tho was a “ruse” cooked up by an “itinerant gentleman” [du sĩ] who forged an imperial edict to dupe the benevolent and righteous common folks [nhon nghi].¹⁸³ In sum, while orthodox Vietnamese histories today regard these rebellions as anticolonial expressions of the Vietnamese people’s indomitable nationalist spirit, Nguyễn Liên Phong dismisses them as pathological behavior arising from insufficient governance and immoral ambitions.

Nguyễn Liên Phong’s above depictions accord with my expectations for a pro-colonial bias by delegitimizing rebellions as banditry, but his treatment of Trương Định bucks with these expectations by praising the anti-colonial rebel and instead condemning the immorality of colonial collaborators. Trương Định (1820-1864) was a Nguyễn officer who refused emperor Tự Đức’s request to stand down after the Treaty of Saigon yielded the eastern provinces of Cochinchina to French control in 1862. He opted instead to continue irregular war from redoubts in his home province in Gò Công. Before the French intervention, Trương Định was a second-generation military plantation officer—a Vietnamese settler political formation through which an imperially recognized aristocrat administers a frontier settlement without any pretext of village civic institutions. After the fall of Saigon, Trương Định grew his guerrilla forces with scattered remnants of the defeated Nguyễn armies. Fighting on without royal support, he was eventually surrounded, betrayed, and committed suicide by stabbing himself in the belly rather than suffer the humiliation of capture.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸¹ “Châu-thành du đặng trong ngoài, Lập phe lập lũ tranh tài với nhau./ Bồn-kèn, đường-mới đầu đầu, Cù chì tay sắc đứng đầu là hơn./ Nghiêm hình trọng phạt chi sòn/ Miếng cho trả oán rửa hờn mới cam./ Thói dân như vậy sao kham/ Dân dân xin phải trước làm răng he.” Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Nam kỳ Phong tục Nhơn vật Diễn ca Chú thích*, 202.

¹⁸² For the passage on the 18 Betel Groves see Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Nam kỳ Phong tục Nhơn vật Diễn ca Chú thích*, 137. Nguyễn Liên Phong adds that “lyric folksongs” still circulate which blame the rebellion on a personal feud. He does not offer an alternate explanation, but his views may have followed colonial reports that linked the unrest to events in Cambodia that spilled across the Đồng Tháp Marsh and into Gia Định. For a colonial account on the 1885 rebellion see Alfred Schreiner, *Abrégé de l’histoire d’Annam* (L’auteur, 1906), 409. A similar characterization is invoked to explain events in Mỹ Tho that same year. Phong calls them a “ruse” cooked up by an “itinerant gentleman” [du sĩ] who forged an imperial edict to dupe the benevolent and righteous common folks [nhon nghi].

¹⁸³ According to Nguyễn Liên Phong, though the rebel succeeded in amassing plunder in Vĩnh Kim Đông, wicked men seldom last, and he was captured and sent to the prison island Paolo Condore where he soon died. “It’s a shameful fate for such a learned man, whose Confucian medical knowledge [nho y] was worthy of a famous teacher. What good is participation in such artifice [sự trớ trêu], lured by riches into neglecting his life.” Thus, in cases of rebellion where civilization, glossed as Confucian teaching and ritual, are present, he attributes the rebellion to personal moral failings. Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Nam kỳ Phong tục Nhơn vật Diễn ca Chú thích*, 311.

¹⁸⁴ The historiographical status of Trương Định’s defiance is complicated by the question of whether his refusal to obey Tự Đức’s stand-down order after the 1862 Treaty of Saigon constituted an act of supreme imperial loyalty or one of personal insubordination. Mark McLeod presents Định’s campaign as straightforward anti-French resistance rooted in local military-plantation networks; David Marr situates Định within a broader tradition of Vietnamese anticolonialism as one of the earliest exemplars of armed resistance. Trương Buu Lam’s edited volume foregrounds the tension between loyalty to the throne and loyalty to the land, a distinction that allowed southern resisters to cast continued fighting as fidelity to the deeper spirit of imperial duty even against the emperor’s explicit wishes. Nguyễn Liên Phong’s treatment suggests he held something close to the third position: Định is praised for martial virtue and loyalty to the throne, with no suggestion that his disobedience to Tự Đức diminished his stature. The coincidence between Phong and Lam could arise from the fact that they are both close readers of Nguyễn Đình Chiểu, who

Nguyễn Liên Phong's passage praising Trương Định appears in the Gò Công chapter:

Đám lá tối trời a place of renown, where Trương Định showed a liver of gold.
Where the righteous banner once flew, he commanded troops to aid the throne.
But one hand alone cannot clap, a blade to his stomach, as though life were sport.
Victory is decided by heaven, but success doesn't define the hero.
To be man is to make a name, and his name remains etched forever young in stone.
Today there remains a servant to his house, Lieutenant Chấn, upright and loyal.
With unwavering will, he prepares offerings of rice and wine for the poor soul.
Oh Chan! today you suffer dire straits, performing the rites in a humble garden shrine.
Local officials collude against him with frivolous suits.
With the damage from the recent typhoon, who knows if the shrine will be repaired.¹⁸⁵

Nguyễn Liên Phong's account subverts expectations in several ways. Not only does he praise Trương Định despite the figure's anti-colonial character. Trương Định pursued his military campaign against the explicit wishes of emperor Tự Đức, which puts Nguyễn Liên Phong's praise into an ambiguous position toward the traditional value of imperial loyalty. Despite meeting these ostensibly disqualifying criteria, few individuals in *Figures and Folkways* receive such unreserved praise. Furthermore, Nguyễn Liên Phong does not restrict this anomalous treatment to a historical account. He extends it into the present with a sympathetic portrait of Định's surviving lieutenant, Chấn who, after his release from Côn Đảo Prison, spent his life in poverty tending to Trương Định's altar. Even more surprising, Nguyễn Liên Phong criticizes the local colonial officials, Vietnamese men who probably owed their position to betraying Trương Định, for their unjust use of the colonial legal system to satisfy their malice. Thus, Nguyễn Liên Phong explicitly attributes righteousness to Trương Định while condemning the unethical behavior of colonial collaborators.

Nguyễn Liên Phong further extends his to condemnation of collaborators in separate section devoted to Huỳnh Công Tấn and his son, Huỳnh Văn Miêng. Huỳnh Công Tấn betrayed Trương Định to the colonial authorities. After delivering Trương Định and defecting to the French, he became a counterinsurgency commander, bringing down two other major resistance figures, Võ Duy Dương in the Đồng Tháp Marshes and Nguyễn Trung Trực in the Gulf of Thailand. His son, Huỳnh Văn Miêng, studied in France, then returned to the colony to serve in the colonial native

memorialized Trương Định in a similar fashion. Mark W. McLeod, "Trương Định and Vietnamese Anti-Colonialism, 1859–64: A Reappraisal," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 24, no. 1 (1993): 88–105, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S002246340000151X>; Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism 1885-1925*; Truong Buu Lam, *Patterns of Vietnamese Response to Foreign Intervention 1858-1900* (Cellar Book Shop, 1967); A particularly interesting discussion can be found in Milton E. Osborne, "Truong Vinh Ky and Phan Thanh Gian: The Problem of a Nationalist Interpretation of 19th Century Vietnamese History," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 30, no. 1 (1970): 81–93, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2942724>.

¹⁸⁵ Đám lá tối trời, literally meaning "where leaves darken the sky", is a region in the marshy water palm forests of Gò Công where Trương Định set up his maquis base. I left the toponym in Vietnamese to avoid the inevitably clunky and misleading English translation. "Tiếng xưa đám Lá-tối-trời./ Có ông Trương-Định trả phoi gan vàng./ Một phương cờ nghĩa nổi vang./ Xung làm Đại-tướng giúp an Triều-định./ Ai dè cô chương nan mình Lưỡi gươm đâm bụng liễu mình như chơi./ Nên không số hệ ở trời./ Há đem thành bại luận người hùng-anh./ Làm trai cho có thân danh, Dấu bia tạc với non xanh chẳng già./ Nay còn một gã tôi nhà, Tên Đốc-binh-Chấn cũng là thảo ngay./ Bền lòng chẳng chút động day./ Đai cơm bầu rượu no say phận nghèo./ Thương thầy gặp lúc hiểm eo, Riêng làm ngôi miếu thờ theo lối vườn./ Viên quan chức sắt bõn hương, Rủ nhau kiện Chấn tụng-đường lôi thôi./ Kể vừa bão tới một hồi, Ngày nay chưa biết tu bồi nữa không." Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Nam kỳ Phong tục Nhơn vật Diễn ca Chú thích*, 250.

militia. Afterward a brief military career he retired to a life as a debauched playboy renowned for squandering his family's wealth. Nguyễn Liên Phong brings up Huỳnh Văn Miêng's ungentlemanly conduct, characterizing it as karmic retribution for his father's betrayal of Trương Định.¹⁸⁶ Such a forceful condemnation of the early colonial collaborators is difficult to square with his previous similarly expressed condemnation of anti-French rebels.

As mentioned above, Vietnamese scholars have interpreted Nguyễn Liên Phong's contradictory treatment of rebellion as evidence of secret anticolonial intentions. I disagree. Instead, I think the model of the elite which I introduced in chapter three better explains what ostensibly appears to be an anomalous depiction of Trương Định. The turn of the century Cochinchinese gentry grappled with fashioning a worldview that could span both poles of the Franco-Nguyễn Détente. The elite bloc stitched together the old loyalist gentry to the partisans who rallied to the colonial conquest. These men needed intellectuals like Nguyễn Liên Phong to assemble a pantheon of Confucian exemplars broad enough to extoll the martial daring of both righteous rebels like Trương Định and colonial loyalists like Trần Bá Lộc, while simultaneously claiming the intellectual heritage of colonial Catholics like Trương Vĩnh Ký and anti-colonial poets like Nguyễn Đình Chiểu.¹⁸⁷ The problem facing the turn of the century elite, present across all four themes discussed in this chapter, was to determine the common denominator that could unify the elite bloc. Nguyễn Liên Phong settled on Confucian virtues like martial daring, technical excellence and aristocratic loyalty. These criteria honored Trương Định's resistance and Trần Bá Lộc's accommodation within a single moral vocabulary. A similar evaluative framework characterizes the passages covering wild spaces and urban vice. *Figures and Folkways* measures virtue and orderly authority, not regionalism or political allegiance. Subsequent sections will make clear that Nguyễn Liên Phong applies this yardstick across a diverse range ethnic and political spaces. However, all chapters are marked by deep appreciation for the Nguyễn dynasty.

¹⁸⁶ “Cuộc chơi chẳng tiếc đồng tiền, Đá cân làm bạc vạn thiên chi mành. Mấy năm oanh liệt một tràng, ruộng vườn dinh dẫy giàu sang ai bì. Sự đời nháy mắt hưng suy, thiên cơ báo ứng tóc tri hiên nhiên.” Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Nam kỳ Phong tục Nhơn vật Diễn ca Chủ thích*, 254.

¹⁸⁷ Interestingly, all four of these men are from the Orchard Heartland. Regarding Nguyễn Đình Chiểu, *Figures and Folkways* contains two poems eulogizing Phan Thanh Giản, one in Nôm and one in Hán. Nguyễn Liên Phong misidentified the Nôm poem as Phan Thanh Giản's own deathbed composition [di thi], when it was in fact written by Nguyễn Đình Chiểu. This error propagated widely: the poet Đông Hồ Lâm Tấn Phác reproduced the misattribution when he republished the poem in Phạm Quỳnh's *Nam Phong* in 1926, and Thái Hữu Vỡ repeated it in his *Phan Thanh Giản Truyện* (1927). Lê Thọ Xuân, a friend of Nguyễn Đình Chiểu's son Nguyễn Đình Chiêm, corrected the attribution in a 1933 article in *Đồng Nai* (nos. 23–24), and Phan Văn Hùm's *Nỗi Lòng Đồ Chiểu* (2nd ed., Saigon: Tân Việt, 1957), prepared with the assistance of Chiểu's granddaughter Mai Huỳnh Hoa, established the most authoritative version of both poems. Nevertheless, the error resurfaced when Ngô Tất Tố repeated it in his *Thi Văn Bính Chú* in the 1940s, prompting further corrections from Ứng Hòe Nguyễn Văn Tố, Lê Thọ Xuân, and Trục Thần in *Tri Tân* no. 89 (April 1943). The corrupted versions also gave rise to a separate controversy among post-1975 scholars in Hanoi: Trần Nghĩa (1972) and Trần Khuê (*Nghiên Cứu Lịch Sử* no. 275, 1994) argued, on the basis of the inaccurate texts, that Nguyễn Đình Chiểu had covertly condemned rather than praised Phan Thanh Giản. For the most thorough recent treatment of the full textual transmission and its distortions, see Winston Phan Đào Nguyên, *Mối Tâm Tình Của Nguyễn Đình Chiểu Dành Cho “Quan Phan” Phan Thanh Giản* (San Jose: Nhân Ảnh, 2022). Particularly the section posted on the Văn Việt website at: Winston Phan Đào Nguyên, *Mối tâm tình của Nguyễn Đình Chiểu dành cho “Quan Phan” Phan Thanh Giản (kỳ 2) | Diễn đàn Câu lạc bộ Văn đoàn Độc lập Việt Nam*, n.d., accessed March 25, 2026, <https://vanviet.info/nghien-cuu-phe-binh/moi-thm-tnh-cua-nguyen-dnh-chieu-dnh-cho-quan-phan-phan-thanh-gian-ky-2/>.

Nguyễn Loyalism

Melancholy for the Nguyễn past runs throughout *Figures and Folkways*. This theme reflects the bifurcated loyalties of Nguyễn Liên Phong's generation. Members of his cohort balanced allegiance to the imperial legacy with an appreciation for the developmentalist colonial project. Subsequent sections will deal with the way Nguyễn Liên Phong situated the colonial project into his worldview. In this section, I will describe his Nguyễn loyalism across three forms: first, in the memory of the dynastic founder Nguyễn Ánh; second, second, in the veneration of the Delta province of Gò Công as a geomantic anchor of Nguyễn legitimacy; and third, in adoration for the emperor Thành Thái.

The memory of Gia Long- Nguyễn Ánh

Nguyễn Ánh, founder of the Nguyen dynasty, appears in 34 different passages of *Figures and Folkways*, including every single chapter except the preface. Sometimes, Nguyễn Liên Phong reckons dates by Nguyễn Ánh's reign. Elsewhere he invokes Nguyễn Ánh in discussions of historical events such as the Tây Sơn wars, often praising the areas that mobilized resources, officers, and regiments on his behalf. Sometimes he ties such contributions to a province's present-day prosperity. For example, he claims that Bà Rịa takes its name from a woman who patronized Gia Long's troops, and "due to past blessings and righteousness, village notables and officials built shrines in her honor; in these villages young and old alike, whoever is full and warm gives thanks to her."¹⁸⁸ In the opening lines of the chapter on Biên Hoà we learn that "Cao-Hoàng conquered Phú Xuân thanks to strategic resources contributed [*bình hưng hiển tài*] by Lộc dã [Đồng Nai]", which included "mountains full of lumber and quarries full of stone."¹⁸⁹

In some chapters, Nguyễn Liên Phong opens with Nguyễn Ánh's relation to the province and connects current prosperity to the space's past loyalty. For example, the opening pages of the Gia Định chapter include an ode to Gia Long and Lê Văn Duyệt, the demotic character passages devoted to these men make up the majority of the demotic characters in the text.¹⁹⁰ In Tân An, Nguyễn Liên Phong praises Gia Long's lieutenant Nguyễn Huỳnh Đức along with his descendant Nguyễn Huỳnh Hữu, who still today tends the family shrine to ensure that "heaven never betrays the pillars of the nation".¹⁹¹ The chapter on Gò Công opens with an account of Võ Tánh's regiments linking up with Gia Long after he returned from Siam, while he praises the "prosperous and powerful" Three Ridges region of Mỹ Tho for its role in "crushing the Tây Sơn pirates on the battlefield". Vĩnh Long, which "often sheltered Gia Long when he was harried by the Tây Sơn, is now a populous rural area where that bears the marks of past wealth power and piety."¹⁹²

Given the text's strong historical orientation, the attention Nguyễn Liên Phong gives to Gia Long is no surprise. But his depiction of the Tây Sơn, set against his treatment of Gia Long, gives a

¹⁸⁸ Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Nam kỳ Phong tục Nhơn vật Diễn ca Chú thích*, 67.

¹⁸⁹ Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Nam kỳ Phong tục Nhơn vật Diễn ca Chú thích*, 79.

¹⁹⁰ Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Nam kỳ Phong tục Nhơn vật Diễn ca Chú thích*, 113.

¹⁹¹ "Làng Tường-khánh, tổng Hưng-long, Tục kêu Cái-én là giồng Tiên-quân./Phò Cao-hoàng, đại công huân, Ông Nguyễn-huỳnh-Đức gian truân nhiều lần./Sanh vi tướng tử vi thần, Hiện tồn lưu tấm mộ phần tại nơi./Cháu chắt còn ba bốn đời, Là Nguyễn-huỳnh-Hữu rặng ngời gia đình./Lửa hương phụng sự thủ thành, Người kêu lẫm miếu anh linh thấy thường./Công thần cơ nghiệp miên trường, Thiệt trời không phụ cột rường quốc-gia."Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Nam kỳ Phong tục Nhơn vật Diễn ca Chú thích*, 244.

¹⁹² Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Nam kỳ Phong tục Nhơn vật Diễn ca Chú thích*, 247, 283, 317.

sense of his devotion to the Nguyễn imperial legacy. In the chapter on Biên Hoà, Nguyễn Liên Phong calls the Tây Sơn “rebels” [*giặc*]; in Mỹ Tho and Châu Đốc, “bandits” [*tặc; tặc đảng*]; in Long Xuyên, “insurrectionists” [*loạn quân*].¹⁹³ These terms contrast with the passages devoted to Gia Long, which evoke gratitude, melancholy, and affection. Nguyễn Liên Phong’s melancholy springs from the physical environment itself. For example, in Long Xuyên, “compliments to the village notables, so moved for compassion for the kingdom. Fondly reminiscing on the tales of yore, when high emperor sought passage, oh my liege on his travels.”¹⁹⁴ Or his reaction when he reached a bend in the river near Sa Đéc where Nguyễn Ánh once stationed his troops, “here they still sing to show that passions haven’t subsided, ‘passing over the swirling river I’m overcome with memories of the High Emperor, my whole heart for you, my liege’.”¹⁹⁵ Similarly in Rạch Giá, “Back when high emperor Gia Long many times took refuge here. The historical records clearly show, each budding leaf, each inch of land today lends deep feelings of debt.”¹⁹⁶ The phrase “each budding leaf, each inch of land” [*ngọn rau tác đất*] is an ancient idiom expressing gratitude and loyalty to the sacrifices a king makes for the prosperity of the kingdom. Not once does Nguyễn Liên Phong employ the term to refer to the colonial state. *Figures and Folkways* thus prominently extolls the southern elite’s continued allegiance to the Nguyễn state in a way that contradicts common depictions of a deracinated and Francophile Cochinchinese elite.

Gò Công: the roots of loyalism

The gentry’s affection for the Nguyễn Dynasty extended to a special admiration for the Gò Công roots of Queen Mother Từ Dụ, which Emperor Thành Thái’s 1897 trip south revived. The Gò Công chapter makes that link explicit, beginning with an account of former Minister of Rites Phạm Đăng Hưng’s tomb in Sơn Quý, the homeland of the royal matriline. Nguyễn Liên Phong praises Từ Dụ -- mother of former emperor Tự Đức and daughter of Phạm Đăng Hưng -- as proof of the geomantic powers of Cochinchina. The narrative then shifts to emperor Thành Thái’s visit to the tomb during his tour, which “the local officials received with utmost gravity, lining both sides of the road to watch his majesty pass.”¹⁹⁷

¹⁹³ Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Nam kỳ Phong tục Nhơn vật Diễn ca Chủ thích*, 83, 291, 384.

¹⁹⁴ “Khả khen các chức bốn hương, Quốc vương thủy thổ chạnh thương bồi hồi./ Nhớ xưa sự tích ngùi ngùi, Cao hoàng tìm để chúa tôi ra vào.” Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Nam kỳ Phong tục Nhơn vật Diễn ca Chủ thích*, 386.

¹⁹⁵ “Còn câu hát hãy đành rành, Nói luôn cho biết dân tình không nguì./ Qua sông nước xoáy ngùi ngùi, Nhớ Cao hoàng trước chúa tôi một lòng.” Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Nam kỳ Phong tục Nhơn vật Diễn ca Chủ thích*, 440.

¹⁹⁶ “Thuở Cao hoàng-để Gia-Long, Lắm khi trú tắt ruồi dung lánh nân./ Sứ xanh còn chép rõ ràng, Ngọn rau tác đất thấy càng cảm thâm.” Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Nam kỳ Phong tục Nhơn vật Diễn ca Chủ thích*, 396–98.

¹⁹⁷ “Hai bên hương-án đầy bờ, Viên quan Hương-chức chực hờ bái nghinh./ Lễ nghi phẩm tiếc nghiêm minh, Cờ-trùng hoan hỉ lạc tình thiên nhan.” Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Nam kỳ Phong tục Nhơn vật Diễn ca Chủ thích*, 252–53.



Visite de l'empereur d'Annam au tombeau de ses ancêtres à Gocong (Cochinchine).

Figure 3. Thành Thái's visit to ancestral tombs in Gò Công. *L'illustration*, no 2865, 22 janvier. 1898. 77

Nguyễn Liên Phong also wrote in praise of the Queen Mother continued after the publication of *Figures and Folkways*. He produced a *quốc ngữ* translation of Từ Dụ's entry in the *Collected Biographies of the Great South* [*Đại Nam liệt truyện*] in 1913.¹⁹⁸ The text, which includes endorsements from a range of prominent Cochinchinese notables, is further evidence of the widespread devotion to the Nguyễn Dynasty among Cochinchinese elites before the First World War

These figures saw in Từ Dụ a model for Cochinchinese women. To them, she was a figure who anchored the Cochinchina's place in the nation while modelling Franco-Annamite collaboration and resisting the morally corrosive aspects of modernity. In Nguyễn Liên Phong's words, the Queen Mother was "truly a woman bathed in virtue, a pillar of our nation. Benefiting from the protection of Great France, Emperor Duy Tân diligently pursues his studies, while the court officials are dedicated to maintaining proper governance."¹⁹⁹ Nguyễn Liên Phong explains that someone gifted him the multi-volume *Collected Biographies of the Great South* — perhaps his inspiration for his later work *Verses of Homage*—and was so impressed with the Queen Mother's example that he decided to translate it into *quốc ngữ* as a source of moral edification for Cochinchinese youth.

Keep in mind that over the last ten years or so since *quốc ngữ* has begun to prosper, many texts have been translated by us Confucians [*mấy ông Nhu văn*], however they've been histories of other countries, so with permission I would like you gentlemen to recall that: With each step taken one must remember one's ancestors, With each sip of water, one shouldn't forget its source.

¹⁹⁸ Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Từ - Dũ Hoàng thái hậu truyện* (Imp. F.-H. Scheider, 1913).

¹⁹⁹ Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Từ - Dũ Hoàng thái hậu truyện*, 8.

If these days we pride ourselves on our modernity [*văn minh tiến bộ*], and yet scoff at our ancestors, then we surely won't avoid becoming modern but dead, infamous for our betrayal.

Similarly anxious attitudes toward modernity characterized the five Orchard Heartland gentry endorsements prefacing the text.²⁰⁰ Nguyễn Văn Nghiêm, a *Tú Tài* from Vĩnh Long born in the early 1840s, hoped the translation would “help civilize at a time when people’s customs have just reformed.”²⁰¹ An embodiment of the Franco-Nguyễn Détente, Nghiêm had studied as a youth in Huế, but he reacted to the French conquest by adopting a posture of gentlemanly reclusion, leaving public life and tending to his estate. Phong recalls that “he was renowned all around for his erudition [*văn học*]” and for “keeping the old manners and rites.” Another endorsement came from Phạm Đăng Sơn, a herbalist from Vĩnh Long who had since moved to Tân Định neighborhood of Saigon. He also voiced approval of the good example the book set for women.

Ngô Ngọc Quang, a canton chief from Mỹ Tho, echoed the sentiment that such role models were necessary as “civilization was progressing” [*văn minh lại cải lương tấn bộ*]. Strangely, Quang doesn't merit his own an entry in *Verses of Homage*, but he appears in four entries of other figures. As Canton chief of Thuận Bình he tended to Lê Văn Duyệt's familial tombs. In *Verses of Homage*, Nguyễn Liên Phong describes his father, Ngô Ngọc Lựu, as “from a righteous and noble house of many generations,” and a wealthy “village elder” [*hương cả*] who “loved the way of the sages” [*yêu chuộng đạo thánh hiền*] and often helped the poor. Quang's daughter married Nguyễn Văn Khuê, a member of the provincial council of Mỹ Tho, and Quang's mother, one of the few women with an individual entry in *Verses of Homage*, helped spearhead the renovation of the Linh Thử Tự pagoda, supporting *Hoà thượng* Quang Ân and purchasing a golden buddha statue from Hà Nội.²⁰²

The fourth dedication is from Phạm Ngọc Tí, a deputy canton chief, also from Mỹ Tho, and part of a multigenerational local elite family. He makes the connection to Gò Công explicit,

She is not only the root of our Nguyễn Dynasty, even today we see that, currently, her descendants among the queen mother's native village and marriage ties in Gò Công, are prosperous caretakers of the her nobility, carrying no animus to the colonial regime, thus is it not the case that the abundant righteousness she has left over generations will ensure that the dynasty endures unto her distant posterity?

²⁰⁰ The anxiety seems closely related to the collapse of the Confucian moral universe brought about by *quốc ngữ* and western education. As will be shown in Chapter 4, the Cochinchinese elite constantly raised the issue in the Colonial Council. Their concern for the problem are not only inferable from the publishing agenda of their books, times made explicit in melancholic scenes of lost tradition in *Figures and Folkways*. For example, in a passage from the Gò Công chapter which follows immediately after one describing a slew of men who embodied Confucian values. “What pity the transformations brought about by upheaval./ The previous generation's campus in utter ruins./ When the Study of The Way lived on, literature and culture hadn't yet eroded./ But now among the newer generation,/ habits continuously transform and cannot reach perfection./ The nephews born later, study western letters to find a career.” [Thương thay thế biến ly loạn, Khuôn viên lớp trước điêu tàn không lựa. Hồi còn đạo học dây dưa, Văn chương phong nhã cách chưa tiêu mòn. Lâu lâu qua đến đời con, Thói đời lần đổi vuôn tròn đặng đầu. Vậy nên mấy cậu sanh sau, Chữ Tây ăn học lo cầu xuất thân.] Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Nam kỳ Phong tục Nhơn vật Diễn ca Chú thích*, 257.

²⁰¹ For Nghiêm's biography see Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Điếu Cổ Hạ Kim Thi Tập*, 137. All the gentry endorsements discussed below appear from pages 2-8 of Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Từ - Dũ Hoàng thái hậu truyện*.

²⁰² Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Điếu Cổ Hạ Kim Thi Tập*, 51, 112, 244, 279.

If most endorsements reflected the anxieties of conservative modernization experienced on behalf of the Orchard Heartland gentry, the fifth and final endorsement reiterates how this seemingly traditional and conservative elite was also deeply intertwined with the *quốc ngữ* public sphere. It was penned by Nguyễn Hữu Hạnh, the current chief editor of *Six Provinces News*, who also hailed from an august Orchard Heartland clan.²⁰³

I was overjoyed when I read the book, happy for the faithful [thiện nam tín nữ] who could now witness the queen mother's great example, but also happy for our land of Cochinchina, a land so replete with efficacious spiritual energy since olden times; if past generations could produce such saints, then ours too will have its share of women. They are modernizing day by day [văn minh tiến bộ thêm], while in purity and firmness of will they grow greater still, in no way inferior to the women of Europe, America or China.

The endorsers of the *Từ Dụ* translation reflect the position of the Orchard Heartland gentry before the First World War. They were Mỹ Tho canton chiefs and Vĩnh Long degree holders, men from multigenerational notable families who oversaw village rituals, patronized pagodas, married into provincial councils, and tended the tombs of Nguyễn heroes. They also exemplified the tensions of the Franco-Nguyễn Détente—they welcomed modernization for its developmental promise while fearing its corrosive effects on the Confucian moral order that underwrote their authority. Their shared devotion to the Queen Mother was a devotion to the dynasty itself, and through it to a vision of Cochinchina as a land whose civilizational worth derived from its place in the Nguyễn imperial project. The fact that the current chief editor of *Six Provinces News* stood among them confirms the deep ties binding the Vietnamese public sphere to the Orchard Heartland Gentry rather than an urban Francophile intelligentsia, as the conventional historiography suggests.

Empereur Thành Thái's visit

Thành Thái's 1897 visit to Cochinchina reinforced the ties linking the Cochinchinese elite to the throne. Đặng Lễ Nghi's 600-line 6-8 meter poem "A Ballad on the King's Trip to Gia Định" makes the link explicit, published by Đình Thái Sơn and Lê Phát An's company, *L'Imprimerie de l'Union*.²⁰⁴ The appendix of this book contains an account of Đình Thái Sơn's imperial awards gala, which I discussed in the previous chapter. Both Đình Thái Sơn and Nguyễn Liên Phong received awards from Huế that year. That Đình Thái Sơn appended such an account to a poem about Thành Thái's Cochinchinese tour charts a growing intimacy between Huế and Saigon.

The text was reissued several times. While this fact might imply no more than a growing market for such material, a political motivation may also be at work. Đình Thái Sơn published the first edition in 1907 and reissued it a third time in 1917. These dates raise the possibility that Đình Thái Sơn reissued the text to express support for the court in the face of French meddling with the imperial succession: the French deposed Thành Thái for "health reasons" in 1907, and his heir Duy Tân fled the imperial palace in 1916, earning him permanent exile. In either case,

²⁰³ Hạnh's father, Nguyễn Văn Vạn was a village notable from Đa Phước village in Mỏ Cày area of Bến Tre. Nguyễn Liên Phong described him as a Confucian gentleman, "He knew the demotic script and adored the way of the sages, he only drank good tea and good wine, and his hand never left his books. His recreation [ăn chơi] was done in style. Back then he was a village official, and we often had discussion about the classic texts of poetry and music, we were truly a delightful match." Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Điếu Cổ Hạ Kim Thi Tập*, 117.

²⁰⁴ The text is also discussed in chapter three. Đặng Lễ Nghi, *Ngự Du Gia Định Diễn Ca*.

Thành Thái's tour of the south in 1897 left a strong impression on the southern gentry. The content of the poem, with its public adoration of the emperor and gratitude for France, is largely unremarkable. Nevertheless, its existence reveals close relations between the Saigon publishing world and Huế.

Across this section, three lines of evidence have established the depth and reach of Nguyễn loyalism within the antebellum Cochinchinese elite. The space Nguyễn Liên Phong dedicates to Nguyễn Ánh's southern lieutenants and their descendants, the affective vocabulary of debt, melancholy, and gratitude in the passages devoted to Gia Long, and the publishing relationship between Saigon and Huế evidenced by the *Collected Biographies of the Great South* translation and the *Ballad on the King's Trip to Gia Định* together demonstrate that Nguyễn loyalism was not a residual sentiment confined to a few aging mandarins. It was, instead, an active ideological commitment of the Cochinchinese gentry on the eve of the Great War. This finding cuts against historiographical accounts that treat the colonial conquest as having severed the southern elite from the imperial center. The persistence of dynastic attachment alongside collaboration with the colonial state belongs to the larger argument of this chapter: that the antebellum elite worked to hold its precolonial inheritance and its colonial position in tension rather than to choose between them.

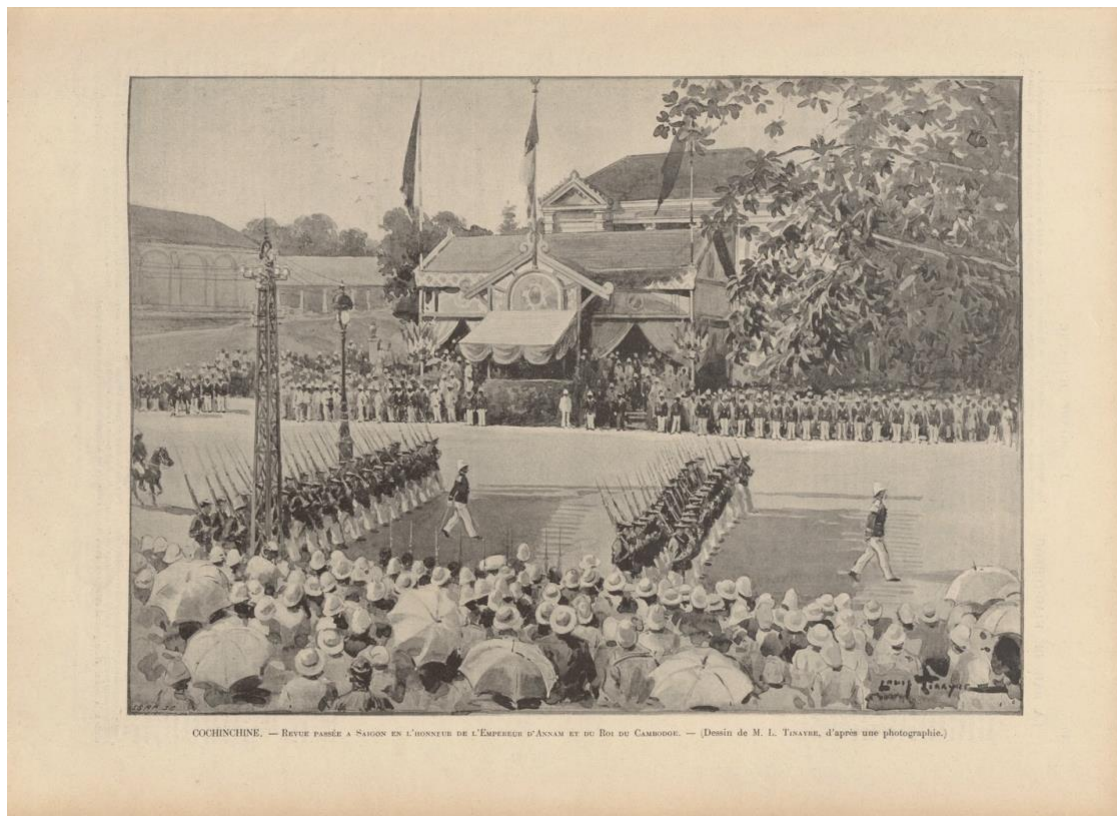


Figure 4 Procession from the Royal Tour of Saigon in 1897²⁰⁵

²⁰⁵ "Le Monde illustré," Gallica, January 1, 1898, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k6587542v>.

Cochinchina as a harmonious realm of ethno-religious pluralism

The previous sections show that Nguyễn Liên Phong grounded his world view in Confucian virtue ethics and loyalty to the Nguyễn monarchy. The next sections show how turn of the century Cochinchinese elites joined these traditionalist attitudes to a modernist faith in technological progress and scientific management. One major obstacle facing Nguyễn Liên Phong and the turn of the century Cochinchinese elite was to integrate the colonial plural society to legitimate traditionalist moral order, even as Vietnamese did not sit at the top of social order.

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One method Nguyễn Liên Phong uses to legitimize colonial government institutions is by borrowing institutional terminology from the Nguyễn state. Referred to as either The State [*Nhà Nước*], The Nation [*Quốc Gia*], or, to contrast with the Old Regime [*Cựu Trào*] of the Nguyễn Empire, the New Regime [*Tân Trào*], the colonial state most often appears in passages depicting a positive transformation toward increasing civilizational order, or commenting on the aesthetic character of the built environment. Nguyễn Liên Phong refers to colonial offices throughout the various provincial capitals with a Sinitic compound *phan* [tax office] and *niết* [law courts] and he often praises them as “orderly” [*chỉnh tề*] or “refined” [*lịch xnh*]. He uses the same terms to compliment well-ordered village ritual institutions, implying that colonial governance shares a virtuous quality that ordered proper relations under the old regime.

The closing passage of the introduction is typical: Nguyễn Liên Phong summarizes the colonial administrative structure in Sinitic administrative terms and compliments the aesthetic orderliness of its physical offices.

The South has one Governor, leading the Six provinces with prosperity and authority.
Each *arrondissement* is distinct, with its offices in good repair.

The six boards are everywhere governing upright.

Councils and committee orderly and neat, people at ease, peace where once was war.²⁰⁷

Just as the terms “*bên phan bên niết*” refer generally to colonial offices, a slightly modified “six boards” are invoked in reference the ministries of the colonial state, except rites [*bộ lễ*] and personnel [*bộ lại*] are replaced with *thương* and *sĩ*, presumably referring to customs and the interior, since rites handled tribute and *lại* handled personnel.

²⁰⁶ The term “plural society” derives from J.S. Furnivall, who developed it in his comparative studies of British Burma and the Dutch East Indies. Furnivall argued that colonial societies typically developed ethnic divisions between political, mercantile and agricultural classes. With the ethnic majority group dominating agricultural labor and lower administrative posts, a mercantile minority group dominating commerce and finance – Indians in Burma and Chinese in the Dutch East Indies-- and the Europeans controlling the state. The ethnic groups live side by side under a single political authority but mix only in the marketplace, retaining distinct languages, religions, customs, and economic functions. Lacking a common social will, the plural society is held together not by shared values but by the coercive force of the colonial state and the imperatives of the export economy. Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice*.

²⁰⁷ “Nam-kỳ thống-đốc một ông, Làm đầu sáu tỉnh thanh long tước quyền./Hạt nào hạt nấy đều riêng, Bên phan bên niết mỗi giềng sửa đương./Sĩ, Công, Hình, Hộ, Binh, Thương, Nơi nơi phân trị phô trương phải bề./Hội-đồng Nghị-viện chỉnh tề, Dân an bất động cỏ bề chiến chinh.” Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Nam kỳ Phong tục Nhơn vật Điển ca Chú thích*, 59.

Nguyễn Liên Phong borrowed official imperial office terms and images of a well-ordered built environment to describe the provincial capitals in every chapter. However, although he translates colonial institutions into a familiar Confucian, he does not attempt to assimilate Vietnamese and European identities. Even where Nguyễn Liên Phong praises distinctively European spaces, he marks them as foreign. For example, consider the scenes of Rue Catinat, treated at the start of the Saigon chapter:

Delicious restaurants and hotels,
Leisurely, wine and even billiards.
What place can equal its elegance and style?
Polished roads with shining lamps hung over the street.
Thursday, Saturday and Tuesday,
And Sunday night as well, they perform at the opera house.
Each country has its own wonderful customs,
The intoxicating sound of strings and song.²⁰⁸

Nguyễn Liên Phong depicts Saigon as a distinct country with its own customs. Calling it Westerner Town [Xã Tây], he describes it as a charming foreign oddity. While Nguyễn Liên Phong can partially assimilate the French colonial government to Nguyễn institutional terms, he treats the French people, like other ethnic groups in the text, as exotic phenomena that partake in the beauty of a well-ordered social landscape. On the one hand, he shows a genuine aesthetic appreciation for western ways. On the other, similar expressions characterize the Khmer and Cham. The tension between distinct but complementary ethnic differences key to the text's notion of legitimate government, which is often expressed as the key to managing the collective well-being of a frontier plural society.

Confucianism and Christianity

For Nguyễn Liên Phong, ethnic and religious institutions form the bedrock of a well-ordered civilization. His perspective is neither secularist nor sociological. Paranormal details fill the text, and Nguyễn Liên Phong shows no irony toward folk beliefs excepting millenarian Buddhists, who he scorns. He draws a clear distinction between good religions, marked by well-ordered social relations and genuine piety, and bad religions — superstitions which give rise to disorder. Throughout the text, Nguyễn Liên Phong juxtaposes religious penetration and preservation to well-ordered social behavior and consequent economic well-being. For Vietnamese, Confucian doctrines are paramount, but other 'good religions' are positively evaluated in similar terms. One often encounters passages in which Nguyễn Liên Phong concatenates a host of religious and civic institutions in order to gesture towards a generalized state of institutional well-being. For example, in Cần Thơ, "Beautiful churches and schools, village shrines and Buddhist pagodas, all of them perfected."²⁰⁹

Sites of Confucian ritual, most often associated with good village governance, provide the template against which Nguyễn Liên Phong measures other good religions. He emphasizes how

²⁰⁸ 'Chỗ ăn chỗ ngủ đều ngon, Thông thả lại còn uống rượu đánh lãng. Phong lưu cách điệu ai bằng, Đường đi trong lãng đèn giăng sáng lòa. Thứ năm thứ bảy thứ ba, Với đêm chúa nhựt hát nhà hát tây. Nước nào tục nầy cũng hay, Tiếng đờn tiếng hát nghe say tãnh tình.' Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Nam kỳ Phong tục Nhơn vật Diển ca Chú thích*, 147.

²⁰⁹ "Nhà thờ trường học mỹ miều, Đình thần chùa phật cảnh đều vền vang." Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Nam kỳ Phong tục Nhơn vật Diển ca Chú thích*, 382.

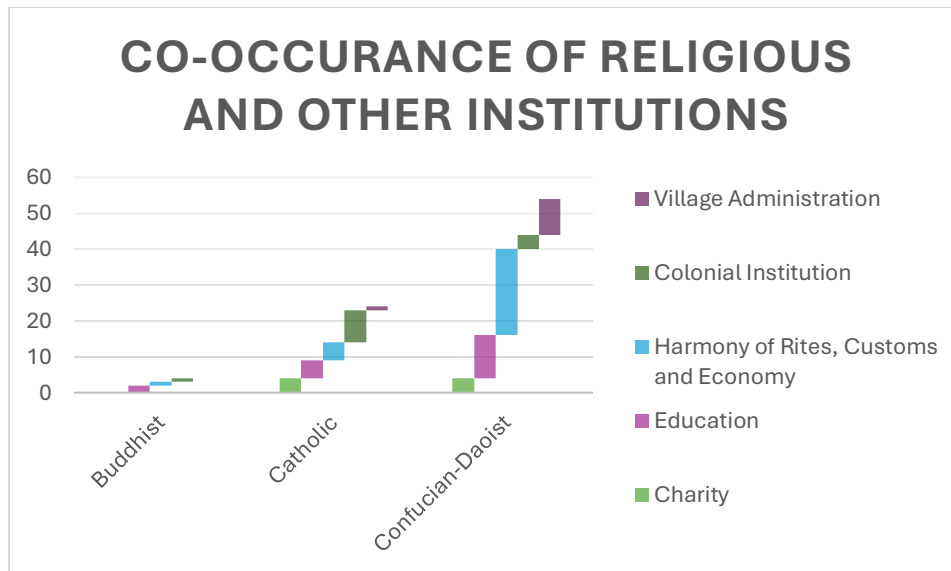
sacred spaces are neatly ordered and how ritual ceremonies, rites, music, and feasts proceed according to old customs with gravitas and regularity. Emphasizing and encouraging the survival of these social forms is a recurring concern for the text. In Long Thành village of Bà Rịa, “Temples and shrines carefully tidied, pure offerings and polite feasts are customary. The imprint of Confucian praxis [học hành] remains, poems, chants and songs passed on. Nights often fill with the sound of flutes, the ways of the sages leisurely continue.”²¹⁰ In Thủ Dầu Một, “Their custom is to love the way of learning, young and old near and far are daring and moral. The imprint has its roots in literature, feasts and music are humble and polite.”²¹¹ In Tân An, “Temples and shrines are very tidy, Rites of autumn and spring follow the old ceremonies. [...] Private schools teach our demotic script, reviewing the past to know the present.”²¹² There are dozens of passages which repeat such sentiments, often mourning the uneven penetration or preservation of these values.

Christianity is the second most common religion discussed in the text. Forty-one passages mention distinctively Christian figures and institutions. To put this in perspective, if we only count passages that refer to Buddhism in a distinctive way, and discount those which invoke it as part of a collective term for indigenous religion, such as “*miếu chúa*” for example, then there are more Christian passages than Buddhist ones. These numbers are imprecise and hinge on the way passages have been identified and counted. They also will tend to undercount Buddhism by discounting passages in which it isn’t dealt with exclusively and therefore should not be taken as evidence that Christianity was more important than Buddhism in any extratextual sense. Nevertheless, the surprising prominence of Christianity does lend a vague sense of the relative magnitudes of religious types in Nguyen Lien Phong’s cognitive mapping of the Cochinchinese elite social space. Christianity is discussed out of all proportion to the relative size of standing among the elite. For example, of the ninety-three figures for whom religious information is mentioned in Nguyễn Liên Phong’s later biographical dictionary *Verses of Homage*, only eight are Christian. Although we shouldn’t understand this number as a full count or even a rough proportion of elite Vietnamese Christians, one would expect a larger share if they had truly dominated the elite. Ultimately, I believe that Nguyễn Liên Phong so frequently mentions Christian institutions out of a genuine appreciation for the religion as a textual tradition and discipline.

²¹⁰ “Miếu chùa tu chỉnh kỷ cương, Tục dân cúng quây cổ bản lịch thanh. Còn roi chữ nghĩa học hành, Phú thi ngâm vịnh sử kinh tụng truyền. Thường đêm trôi khúc quân huyền, Trung dung nho nhã thánh hiền thói dư.” Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Nam kỳ Phong tục Nhơn vật Diển ca Chú thích*, 71.

²¹¹ “Tục hay ham chuộng đạo văn, Trẻ già khấn khải xa gần thiện lương. Roi còn gốc trước văn chương, Ăn chơi đòn địch khiêm nhường phong lưu.” Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Nam kỳ Phong tục Nhơn vật Diển ca Chú thích*, 90.

²¹² “Các chùa miếu rất chỉnh tề, Xuân kỳ thu báo giữ bề lễ nghi.[...] Trường riêng dạy chữ nho ta, Lệ cho ôn cố mới là tri tân.” Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Nam kỳ Phong tục Nhơn vật Diển ca Chú thích*, 236.



Nguyễn Liên Phong praises Christianity, like Confucianism, for its commitment to education, ritual consistency, and well-ordered spaces and relations. It diverges from Confucianism in its mixed ethnic membership and its ties to the colonial state. For example, there are Confucian echoes in the way Nguyễn Liên Phong identifies the seminary as a process of textual mastery and moral clarity of which few are capable, “some misstep and must leave, others patiently cultivate their will in their cells. To be a priest is no easy office, you must master both talent and virtue to succeed.”²¹³ Occasionally a priest is praised for engagement with Confucian learning. For example, Father Đoàn in Chợ Lớn is “venerable and strict, he’s familiar with the Confucian way and he studied medicine.”²¹⁴

Nguyễn Liên Phong portrays churches as sites for inculcating virtue, and he employs the familiar phrasing of tidy spaces with a clear hierarchy. The same motifs recur across cases: well-ordered structures, diligent priests, and thriving parishes whose educational and charitable missions exemplify good governance. For example, in Thủ Dầu Một,

Young boys and girls always ready to attend mass and hear the liturgy.
School are distinct, one teaches the deaf to speak with their hands.
How skillful indeed are the gestures, the virtue from above, comparable to rebirth.
Deaf and mute and yet they are educated [học hành], polite, cultured, worthy of emulation.²¹⁵

²¹³ “La-tinh trường gốc các cha, Cửa trong hội thánh lập đà mấy thu. Để mà dạy những thầy tu, Cõi trong tánh hạnh cang nhu thể nào. Văn chương mẹo mực đường bao, Lựa cho phải mặt mới vào làm cha. Người thời lỗ bước trở ra, Người thời trí chí lâu mà luyện am. Linh mục chức không dễ làm, Hai bên tài đức đều kham mới thành.” Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Nam kỳ Phong tục Nhơn vật Diển ca Chú thích*, 161.

²¹⁴ “Có người tuổi tác tu mi, Chức làm Linh-mục vậy thì tên Đoàn. Lão thành tánh nét ki cang, Sảo thông nho đạo tập nhân y-phương. Ham vui từ diệu văn chương, Thi thơ mắng tháp phô trương luận bàn. Đã về hưu-trí đường nhân, Lương-hòa An-hạ, tổng, làng đều thương. Nay đà lên chốn Thiên-đường, Dầu roi mô phạm chúng thường ngợi tôn.” Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Nam kỳ Phong tục Nhơn vật Diển ca Chú thích*, 231.

²¹⁵ “Đồng-nam đồng-nữ trẻ thơ, Đọc kinh xem lễ từ cơ sáng sủa. Lại thêm trường học rõ ràng, Dạy người cầm diết phép tràn nơi tay. Khéo bày qui cũ rất hay, Bề trên công đức sánh tày tái sanh. Diết cầm còn biết học hành, Lịch thay phong hóa đã đành làm gương.” Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Nam kỳ Phong tục Nhơn vật Diển ca Chú thích*, 95.

Elsewhere, institutions such as the Saigon orphanage and the nun-run hospital in Thị Nghè are praised as exemplifying the Confucian principle of benevolence [*nhon*]. These lines register the blurred boundaries between the colony's nominally secular state institutions and Catholic civic institutions that governed in a pastoral capacity. For example, Nguyễn Liên Phong admires the Saigon girls' school as "the school of the European town" where "French nuns are the teachers these days."²¹⁶ Although colon politics were fractured by conflict between secular Republican masons and Catholics, from the standpoint of the Confucian gentry, the interdependence of Catholic and colonial institutional orders was analogous to the interpenetration of village administrative and ritual institutions.

Buddhism is the third pillar of the institutional landscape.²¹⁷ Like their Confucian counterparts, Nguyễn Liên Phong praises Buddhists for their well-ordered spaces and their commitment to learning. For example, Huỳnh Chon Giác in Sa Đéc "thoroughly studied the Buddha's writings [*nho thích*]. He entered reclusion to manage the pagoda. Who could match his wisdom in learning [*chữ nghĩa*], at just passed 60 years old, his soul returned to Hades."²¹⁸ Unlike their Confucian counterparts, for whom wealth and fame are an outward sign of interior virtue, Buddhists are praised for their commitment to poverty and for shunning notoriety. At Long Thạnh Pagoda in Chợ Lớn we see a "courteous scene" [*cảnh lịch xinh*] where the *Hoà Thượng Hỷ* has "through his praxis achieved much. Thoroughly familiar with the doctrines of the sutras, he's led many disciples in the way [*đạo thuyền*]. [...] He is] Outstanding among men of the Six Provinces for his heart free from earthly ties and aspirations."²¹⁹

Besides establishing the moral character of institutions and practitioners, the Buddhist passages also record how important demotic texts passed from hand to hand and which local patrons hosted the artifacts and itinerant religious leaders. For example, Giác Hải Pagoda in Chợ Lớn had its origins in the personal shrine of gentry widow Trần Thị Liễu, who in 1890 endowed it with a high priest from Gò Công who translated the important Pure Land compendium *Quy nguyên trực chỉ diễn nghĩa*. In Long Hưng village in Mỹ Tho, a village chief and his wife spent more than 3,000 piasters to renovate Sắc Tứ Pagoda and import a golden Buddha statue from

²¹⁶ "Vui xem con nít đông đầy, Gắng siêng đèn sách sau rày đều nên. Trường con gái ở một bên, Cách bày dạy dỗ vững bền lắm thay. Trường của thành phố xã-tây, Nữ-sư Pháp-quốc làm thầy thuở nay. Dạy vừa thêu tiểu vá may, Tiếng tăm chữ nghĩa cho hay mọi nghề. Gái Phan-sa học bọn bề, Học chữ học nghề thêm trí thông minh. Làm ra phong hóa lịch xinh, Sắc tài gồm đủ đáng vinh cho mình." Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Nam kỳ Phong tục Nhơn vật Diễn ca Chú thích*, 162.

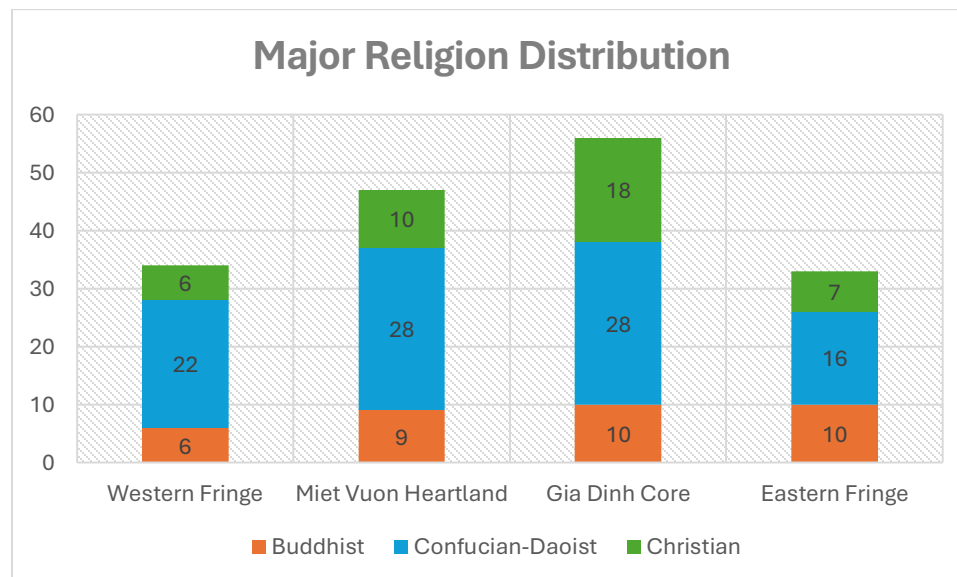
²¹⁷ It would be too tangential here attempt a comprehensive evaluation of the contributions the texts make to Cochinchinese Buddhist history. A large portion of the figures mentioned are invoked as part of the history of Buddhist institutions, and figures already well known for other achievements, such famous Gialong official Trịnh Hoài Đức for example, are unexpectedly praised in a Buddhist capacity. Furthermore, the line between Buddhist and Confucian practice, while sometimes distinct, is often blurred. Vietnamese Buddhist institutions are presented as fully indigenous, and the collective noun "shrines and pagodas" [*miếu chùa*] is used to describe village spiritual and community ritual institutions in general. Therefore, although there is an important specifically Buddhist history, with its own revealing social forces and networks of patronage, for our purposes of showcasing a generalized mode of appreciation for both indigenous and exotic religious institutions, it would be a mistake to draw too fine a distinction.

²¹⁸ "Sau Huỳnh-chon-Giác pháp sư, Học thông nho thích ẩn cư trụ trì. Khôn lanh chữ nghĩa ai bì, Tuổi hơn sáu chục hồn qui âm-cung." Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Nam kỳ Phong tục Nhơn vật Diễn ca Chú thích*, 432.

²¹⁹ "Chùa Long-thạnh, cảnh lịch xinh, Ông Hòa-thượng Hỷ học hành lắm công. Văn chương kinh kệ khá thông, Dạy chư môn đệ học trong đạo thuyền. [...] Thầy chùa sáu tỉnh một ngài, Chẳng lòng trần lụy chẳng hoài lợi danh." Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Nam kỳ Phong tục Nhơn vật Diễn ca Chú thích*, 227.

Hanoi. Similar fundraising drives took place at pagodas in the Seven Mountains region of Châu Đốc and at Linh Sơn Tiên Thạch Pagoda on Tây Ninh's Black Virgin Mountain.

The geography of these passages points to a concentration in the east. I counted 129 distinct passages discussing indigenous Vietnamese religious figures and institutions. Of these, 35 discussed expressly Buddhist institutions and individuals, while 94 were devoted to explicitly Confucian or Daoist temples and shrines. Twenty of the thirty-five entries appeared in the Eastern Fringe and the Gia Định Core, a solid majority. Furthermore, of the fifteen combined entries that appear in the west, three of them are distinctively non-Vietnamese. What I have argued in these sections will similarly apply to the non-Vietnamese groups discussed in the next section: harmonious ethnic relations is a major theme of the text, and Nguyễn Liên Phong grasps the interaction of the colonial plural society by admiring religious institutions. For the distinct ethnic minority groups of the western provinces, he ethnographically subsumes whole groups to the description of a religious institution. But, as will be shown, the Chinese hold a more challenging to summarize position in Nguyễn Liên Phong's rendering of the colony.



Non-Vietnamese Groups

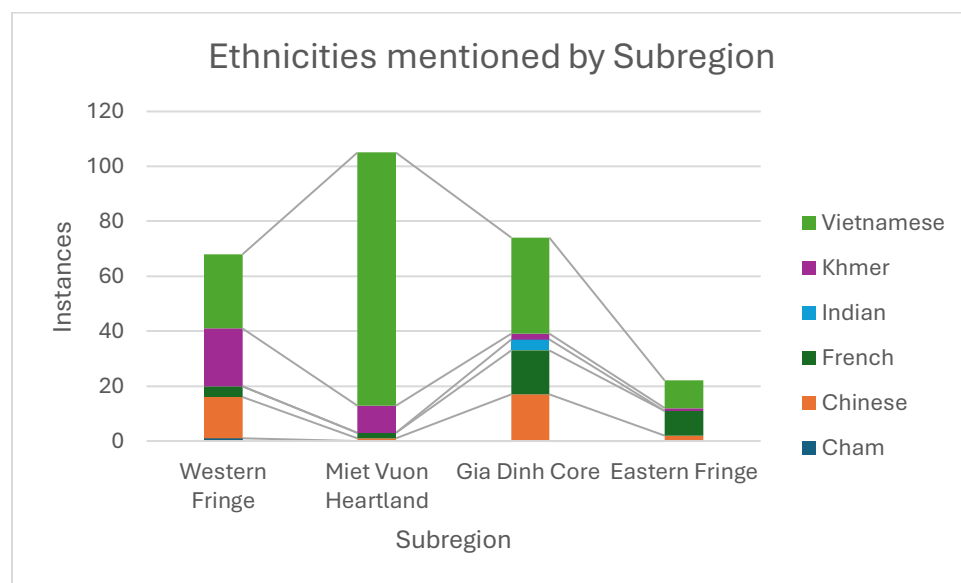
Nguyễn Liên Phong treats non-Vietnamese scenes ethnographically, in a descriptive register.²²⁰ In Trà Vinh, for example, a 48-line passage describes Khmer customs [tục Mên] centered on a pagoda. Scenes across the other chapters typically run no more than ten lines, often half that. The passage reports on how the wealthy are cremated in elaborate scaffolds, while the poor are buried; the elaborate and rare pagoda dedication festival, how donations are ritually thrown into a pile, and how education is concentrated in the pagoda, but is “quick, rudimentary and rustic”, while the written script “is thin and crablike.”²²¹ The level of detail in these sections is meant to convey ethnographic information, and that a subsequent section in later Sóc Trăng refers us back to the Trà Vinh chapter for a summary of their customs likewise implies a pedagogical intent.

²²⁰ As an aside, although Nguyễn Liên Phong doesn't summarize Christianity in a single passage in the way he does for Khmer Buddhism and Cham Islam, the French are similarly summarized in the Saigon chapter in an extensive description of Catholic events, Pentecost Mass, the dress codes, the saint's statues, and so on.

²²¹ Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Nam kỳ Phong tục Nhơn vật Diên ca Chủ thích*, 337.

Nguyễn Liên Phong extends this treatment to other non-Vietnamese groups. In *Châu Đốc*, a 66-line section describes Cham Islam. Nguyễn Liên Phong reports that it was “brought from Egypt,” expressly forbids alcohol and meat, that “around the tenth month they fast all day,” and “like Christians, they weekly gather.”²²² These passages differ from the ones dealing with Vietnamese customs. Cham customs are described in much greater detail, and in a tone of wonder, introducing the Vietnamese audience to the exotic rites of the strangers who live among them. This isn’t to say local Vietnamese had not adopted any of these distinctively foreign practices; indeed, Nguyễn Liên Phong occasionally mentions the Vietnamese assimilation of foreign spirits.²²³ But Vietnamese adoption of non-Vietnamese religious conventions was noteworthy precisely due to their perceived deviation from expected norms.

Ultimately, Nguyễn Liên Phong includes these foreign groups through their difference: the titular figures and folkways of the South are narrated as harmonious diversity. Vietnamese dominate his text and their rights to the land are unquestioned, but Nguyễn Liên Phong recognizes them as settlers who play a central role in the civilizational flourishing of the South. However, if Nguyễn Liên Phong can afford to be unbothered by the odd Vietnamese who adopts Khmer or Cham mores, he casts Vietnamese assimilation of foreign cultures differently in the case of Chinese, whose economic and cultural superiority lends them an ambivalent role in the narrative.



The Ethnic Chinese

The Chinese are the hardest to summarize. Nguyễn Liên Phong depicts them along two distinct lines: religious and socio-economic. Culturally, they sit between both good and bad religion. They provide spiritual and moral leadership to Vietnamese and Khmers alike, sometimes

²²² Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Nam kỳ Phong tục Nhơn vật Diển ca Chú thích*, 413.

²²³ Regarding the Khmer Ong Tà for example, “people often make offerings to his majesty, Whether Viet or Khmer, man or woman.” One ethnic detail which was difficult to incorporate into the main text of this dissertation, but which nonetheless may interest the reader and is evident in the above passage, is that Hón (Hán), a term today associated with Chinese, for example the Han Dynasty or “Hán” Chinese language, is used throughout the text to refer to the Vietnamese.

swindling them in the process. Economically, they exemplify industriousness and tight social cohesion, which makes them both objects of emulation as well as exploiters.

Unlike Khmer Buddhism, Christianity, or Cham Islam, there is little ritual and doctrinal daylight between Vietnamese and Chinese religion. Vietnam is unique among the Southeast Asian countries which received large influxes of Chinese in that the pilgrims could move seamlessly into, and even lead, the sacred spaces of the dominant culture. This idiosyncrasy appears in *Figures and Folkways*, where Vietnamese and Chinese religious institutions are often invoked together as a part of a singular positive spiritual environment. For example the chapter on Gia Định closes by praising the way Vietnamese and Chinese shrines, with their pious attention to proper rites and dress, benefit together from French patronage and contribute to the collective prosperity by appeasing malevolent spirits.²²⁴ Even in passages devoted to more detailed descriptions of Chinese sojourner history and folkways, the holy days mentioned would be familiar to Vietnamese as members of the collective legacy of a broader East Asian religious tradition. In Saigon, for example, we are told that

For the last dozen years or so, the Chinese [Chêc] women have increasingly arrived.
In China [Tàu] there is frequent chaos,
and its people go abroad to search for a living. Leaving ten thousand miles to Nam,
delivering their willowy bodies with a sternness of heart.
It's their custom to often make offerings,
festivals always marking the four seasons and three holidays. [...]
It matters not from which country, for all people's customs become habits.
Great compliments to their pious hearts, for discerning virtue from vice, the good and the beautiful.”²²⁵

Nguyễn Liên Phong repeats this sentiment a few pages later, complimenting the “Qing people” streaming past immigration, as well as the “Bà Ba,” for their commitment to festival offerings which sponsor elaborately costumed musical performances.²²⁶ Here, and in the Chợ Lớn chapter, Nguyễn Liên Phong attributes the success of Chinese institutions to tight social networks, business acumen, and philanthropic sensibilities. He praises the Chinese for “putting profits into

²²⁴ “Hội riêng các miếu chùa nay, An-nam các-chú khéo bày thói ra. Bày ra có hội thờ bà, Hoặc là thờ tổ hoặc là thờ ông. Đồn bà di chí đồn ông, Đến ngày tế tự đồng lòng tư lương. Y quan phẩm tiết tỏ tường, Văn lai thù tạt phô trương dập đều. Làm cho thần khỏi quanh hiêu, Bởi vì tập tục kính yên bày đều. Bến-thành Chợ-lớn quá nhiều, Chùa kia miếu nọ tốt đều qui mô. Pháp-trào vinh viễn cơ đồ, Qui thần đất sở thanh hồ tứ phương.” Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Nam kỳ Phong tục Nhơn vật Diển ca Chú thích*, 146.

²²⁵ “Uớc chừng hơn mười năm nay, Đồn bà nước chệch đổi thay qua thường. Bên Tàu lắm lúc nhiều nhương, Dân đi các nước tiếm phương ăn làm. Tách muôn ngàn dặm sang Nam, Đem thân bỏ liễu lòng cam xa vôi. Sài-gòn Chợ-lớn hai nơi, Chệc trai với xầm thành thói ở trường. Thói hay cúng đốt đèn hương, Tam nguyên tứ quý kỳ nhương liền liền. Đoan-duơng, trùng-cửu thường niên. Đêm khi khát-xảo ngày miền thanh-minh. Trung-thu, Đông-chí rập rình, Lê kia lễ nọ hậu tình biết bao. Người sanh bất luận nước nào, Cũng đều phong tục tập vào thói quen. Tâm lòng thành kính khá khen, Lựa là giàu khó sang hèn mà chi.” Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Nam kỳ Phong tục Nhơn vật Diển ca Chú thích*, 181.

²²⁶ “Thường ngày qua lại người Thanh, Tại tòa Tân-đảo xét trình luân luân. Tục hay đồn dịch giải buồn, Cúng cơm đãi tiệc thơ tuồng xướng ca. Kim, tranh, bài bản rập hòa, Thanh tao nhả hứng miêng ca tay đồn. [...] Chùa Ông-bồn xóm Bà-ba, Tên Phụng-sơn-tự hội mà quá sung. Bên đồn bà, bên đồn ông, Mỗi năm đảo lệ nhóm chung bạc tiền. Xướng ca tế cúng liền liền, Bạn Nam bạn Quản hát liên đêm ngày.” Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Nam kỳ Phong tục Nhơn vật Diển ca Chú thích*, 188.

virtuous works, [...] spending tens of thousands [on joss paper] as though it were nothing,” so that “their long-held habits spill over to all, often copied but with a natural heart.”²²⁷

While Nguyễn Liên Phong praises the Chinese for their commitments to good religion, he also places them at the root of bad religion. However, the distinction between good and bad religion does not correspond to a contemporary common-sense understanding of religion and superstition. Magical wells, auspicious sites of geomantic efficacy, relics of monstrous beasts, paranormal spiritual intervention, and especially ghosts, feature prominently and approvingly throughout the text. Nguyễn Liên Phong never separates the cultural and socio-economic geography from the reality of the spiritual world and its constant interface with the world of the living.

Even so, Nguyễn Liên Phong ridicules some religious practices as “superstition,” – chiefly religions arising from the machinations of malevolent and self-interested cult leaders rather than any legitimate spiritual power. In one case, he singles out a lascivious Buddhist monk who exploits his office to gain access to women. In another, cross-dressing male soothsayers of the mother-goddess cult deceive the faithful for easy cash.²²⁸ Most cases, however, are political, and are associated with what anglophone scholarship calls “millenarianism.”²²⁹ For example, the case of Bảy Lợ in Trà Vinh, whom Nguyễn Liên Phong describes as “a mad fool beyond compare, whose clients came in droves to hear. His enchanting tales deceived the people, whom he flattered into following him. Superstitious and seductively he spoke, inviting them to danger and error.”²³⁰ Similarly the Lê Văn Ong and Nguyễn Văn Khả rebellion in Mỹ Tho, is described as one in which the leaders “lied that magic amulets rendered guns ineffective” and the “people, knowing nothing, thought it a miraculous power and followed them.”²³¹ Interestingly, the only passage which ventures an abstract explanation for *millenarianism* comes at the end of the Chợ Lớn chapter and firmly blames the Chinese.

Our habit is to believe in superstitions, Saigon Chợ Lớn are no less effervescent.

A strange tale every few years, comes from the Chinese who teach us right from wrong.

The Annamese copy after the Chinese. A few monks scurry down from the mountain.

Many times, they are admonished by the law, released, only to reoffend and be imprisoned.

Oh, pity the road overgrown with brambles! Who shall light the righteous way, who shall banish heresy?

Their hearts so gentle and meek, to believe what they see is the collective habit.²³²

²²⁷ “Thường khi sông biển thuận êm, Bạc ngàn trả lễ chẳng hềm tổn hao. Cộ chung không sót Bang nào, Đua nhau khéo vụng lao xao trăm bề. Các phương hi cúng lạc đề, Có dư thì đề của về công nho. Lợ vào trước nhỏ sau to, Cho vay cát phỏ xúm lo bồ chì. Tục hay thượng qui hảo thi, Lại hay tin tưởng những kì dị đoan. Giấy tiền vàng bạc tro tàn, Mua ra phí đến muôn ngàn như không. Tập quen lâu đã trảng đồng, Đã hay bắc chúc mà lòng tự nhiên.” Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Nam kỳ Phong tục Nhơn vật Diễn ca Chú thích*, 210.

²²⁸ See in particular the Châu Đốc chapter. Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Nam kỳ Phong tục Nhơn vật Diễn ca Chú thích*, 413.

²²⁹ Tai, *Millenarianism and Peasant Politics in Vietnam*.

²³⁰ “Vàm Láng-thé, làng Long-hòa, Có tên Bảy-Lợ phát ra làm thầy. Đại diên dốt nát quá tay, Thân chủ lui tới đông đầy đồn rần. Chuyện làm hoặc thể vu dân, Khen cho thiên-hạ rần rần nghe theo. Dị đoan phỉn đồ nhằm dè, Rồi ra làm lỗi hiêm nghèo biết nhiều.” Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Nam kỳ Phong tục Nhơn vật Diễn ca Chú thích*, 351.

²³¹ Mỹ tho line 4457 Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Nam kỳ Phong tục Nhơn vật Diễn ca Chú thích*, 311.

²³² Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Nam kỳ Phong tục Nhơn vật Diễn ca Chú thích*, 234.

His concrete reference is unclear, but the passage nonetheless fits with the broader pattern of perceived Chinese moral and economic leadership. The Chinese were a tightly knit ethnic enclave with strong institutional backing. They served as role models for orthodox festivities and theater arts and as a chief source for heterodox folk beliefs. For example, one passage points to a lively circulation of Hong Kong sorcerers and physiognomists who performed religious functions for the sojourner community. Nguyễn Liên Phong complains that these men, “work while it is stable, then take their money back home,” after terrorizing the locals by “hollering like banshees” out in the street.²³³ The Heaven and Earth Society, a Chinese mafia organization which the French called a “secret society”, is another recurrent form of *bad religion*. Nguyễn Liên Phong glosses the group as the product of “Chinese fathers and Khmer mothers”. They figure prominently in the text, even featuring in the introductory heptasyllabic poems for both Bạc Liêu and Sóc Trăng. In both cases, Nguyễn Liên Phong blames their presence on the poor penetration of *good* Confucianism, which would assumedly have a prophylactic effect.²³⁴ Thus, he blames both millenarian Buddhist rebellion and criminal organizations on the unwanted influence of Chinese immigrant groups – perhaps a recognition of the role the Minh Sư cults were at the time playing in forming the institutions which would over the next two decades grow into the Cao Đài religion.²³⁵

Nguyễn Liên Phong pairs Chinese religious and cultural preeminence with depictions of the Chinese as exemplars of industriousness and commercial acumen. Subsequent chapters of this dissertation show how the figure of the Chinese as vicious foreign exploiter became more prominent in the Vietnamese press from the late aughts into the 1910s. In *Figures and Folkways*, as in the initial years of *Talking Business*, Chinese feature primarily as objects of emulation, both as entrepreneurs and as model proletarians rescued from dangerous idleness by virtuous capitalist industry. Sometimes they work alongside Vietnamese, who benefit from their example in the workshop. Other times they feature as entrepreneurs whose success is living proof of the Vietnamese need for a program of moral and cultural reform. Nguyễn Liên Phong summarized their attributes as equally excellent at both commerce and crafts.²³⁶

Chinese appear alongside Vietnamese as proletarians at shipyards at Khánh Hội, as well as at the Opium Refinery in downtown Saigon. Nguyễn Liên Phong depicts scenes of proletarian discipline with clear divisions of labor as an effective means of providing a virtuous livelihood to the poor and thereby constructing a wealthy and powerful nation. The arsenal exemplifies these themes. In the Gia Định chapter we learn that the establishment employs individuals from a wide area: “In the handful of villages bordering the capital, many men make their living in Saigon. Most of all at Ba-son (Arsenal) Wages are enough for their wives and children to get by.”²³⁷ In the Saigon chapter, Nguyễn Liên Phong portrays the workplace as portrayed as a harmonious unity between a rational division of skilled laborers and white-collar clerks. The terms here translated as “order” [*nghiêm tề*] and to “mend” [*chỉnh tu*] are the same which elsewhere apply to village ritual observance or Catholic Mass. Like religion, Nguyễn Liên Phong depicts industry as a governmental institution which inculcates and coordinates moral behavior among commonfolk.

²³³ Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Nam kỳ Phong tục Nhơn vật Diển ca Chú thích*, 232.

²³⁴ Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Nam kỳ Phong tục Nhơn vật Diển ca Chú thích*, 357, 367.

²³⁵ Jammes, *Les oracles du Cao Đài*.

²³⁶ “Nghề buôn thứ nhứt khôn ngoan, Hai là nghề thợ lại càng khéo lành.” Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Nam kỳ Phong tục Nhơn vật Diển ca Chú thích*, 212.

²³⁷ Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Nam kỳ Phong tục Nhơn vật Diển ca Chú thích*, 128.

Ba Son (the arsenal) is a shipbuilding yard, workers of all type constantly at their tasks. Blacksmiths working hot and cold, each focused on their own duties to finish then rest. Carpenters, drillers, and planers, crafting chairs, tables, cabinets, and chests. Painters and caulkers in their work, welders, metal workers, many more trades. The foreman is the head of operations; the clerks perform well their calculations. Layer on layer of order maintained mending ships with precision and strength.²³⁸

As a state industry, the Arsenal does not foreground the role of the capitalist. But a passage in the *Chợ Lớn* chapter explicitly endorses Chinese business practices and condemns Vietnamese national failures in analogous terms.

Factories abound; shops and stalls crowded with goods for sale.
The Chinese (Qing men) here are prosperous, Livelihoods flow like a bountiful stream.
The poor take on various jobs, the rich provide help without condescending.
Trust and mutual respect on all sides, No greed or suspicion in their dealings.
They join in trade and business, yearly accounts, transparent balance sheets.
The Great South (Vietnamese) way of life, despise those who achieve.
Thus, their rare business ventures are cowardly and seldom succeed.
No match for the Great Qing, who unite heart and effort for far-reaching wealth.²³⁹

As I will show in chapter five, this passage could be drawn directly from the early years of the Saigon newspaper *Talking Business* under the editorship of its founder Lương Khắc Ninh. Lương Khắc Ninh contrasted Chinese entrepreneurial daring and managerial skill with Vietnamese sloth and indolence. Unlike Lương Khắc Ninh, Nguyễn Liên Phong does not depict the Chinese as exploiters. Although Lương Khắc Ninh admired the Chinese more frequently than he accused them, he was far more critical than Nguyễn Liên Phong. While Nguyễn Liên Phong frequently associates the Chinese with banditry and violence, I could find only one passage that associated the Chinese with unjust economic dealings, and it condemns Chinese riverboat gambling operations in the U Minh region as a duplicitous means of accumulating wax from gullible Vietnamese.²⁴⁰ Such passages figure as part of a broader condemnation of illicit gang-led gambling operations, both within the pages of *Figures and Folkways*, and *Talking Business*, as well as in some Vietnamese led initiatives in the Colonial Council which explicitly challenged French toleration of Chinese criminality.²⁴¹ Since this proved such a major plank of *Talking Business*, it will be detailed later.

²³⁸ Ba-son (arsenal) là sở tạo thuyền, Đủ các thứ thợ liền liền làm công. Thợ rèn nóng nguội song song, Phận ai làm nấy cho xong mới nhàn. Thợ bào, thợ dũa, thợ khoan, Thợ mộc đóng ghế, đóng bàn, tủ, rương. Thợ sơn với thợ xam đương, Thợ hàng thợ thiết các phường còn đông. Cập-răng là kẻ đầu công, Những trang thơ-ký thầy thông toán đề. Đâu đâu thứ lớp nghiêm tề, Chính tu thuyền lâm tư bề nhuệ kiên. Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Nam kỳ Phong tục Nhơn vật Diển ca Chú thích*, 164.

²³⁹ “Nhà máy bày sở bộn bề, Tiệm kia tiệm nọ ê hề bán buôn. Người thanh ở đó dư muôn, Làm ăn nghề nghiệp như nguồn nước sung. Kẻ nghèo lãnh việc làm công, Người giàu giúp sức không lòng ghét nghi. Trước sau tin cậy phải nghi, Chẳng hề tham lam chẳng khi ngại tình. Hùn nhau thương mãi kinh dinh, Thường niên tính sổ phân minh vốn lời. Nước Nam nhon tánh ở đời, Ghét người thắng ki sợ người hóa nghi. Vậy nên cát hân công-ti, Nhát gan nhỏ bụng ít khi lập thành. Chẳng bằng người nước Đại-thanh, Tề tâm hiệp lực dinh sanh xa vời.” Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Nam kỳ Phong tục Nhơn vật Diển ca Chú thích*, 206.

²⁴⁰ The author himself recognizes the turning point. See Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Nam kỳ Phong tục Nhơn vật Diển ca Chú thích*, 368.

²⁴¹ Discussed in chapter five of this dissertation.

Taken together, these passages show Nguyễn Liên Phong extending the same standard of institutional order that governs Vietnamese villages outward across Cochinchina's colonial plural society. Khmer pagodas, Catholic parishes, Chinese temples and guildhalls, and French colonial offices each earn praise to the degree that they exhibit ritual regularity, disciplined hierarchy, and well-maintained sacred and civic space. The Chinese case marks the limit of this framework: their commercial solidarity exemplifies the virtues Nguyễn Liên Phong prizes, even as their gambling rackets and gang networks register as the kind of disorder his framework most readily condemns. That he holds these faces apart, rather than reconciling them, reflects the same accommodation traced in the previous sections — a worldview elastic enough to honor Nguyễn loyalty alongside French administrative achievement, and Confucian virtue alongside colonial modernity, without forcing a choice. The harmonious realm Nguyễn Liên Phong describes is held together less by shared belief than by a shared metric of civilizational worth, applied evenly across the communities the gentry encountered.

Extending the Vietnamese civilizational project

The three previous sections showed that Nguyễn Liên Phong integrated the French colonial project into a preexisting moral framework by praising its coordination of tidy spaces, regular ritual time, and the well-ordered popular behavior that flows from virtuous religious institutions. As part of this framework, he also integrated the colonial plural society by incorporating the ethnic groups' major institutions – often religious, but also political and economic-- in that framework's moral vocabulary.

The fourth and final major theme similarly narrates a Franco-Vietnamese civilizational conquest of wild and disordered space but is distinct from the previous three in the way Nguyễn Liên Phong explicitly legitimizes the colonial political order by situating it in a *longue durée* Vietnamese settler colonial project. Whereas the first three themes juxtaposed the institutions and products of French domination to precolonial moral goods, the fourth theme credits French tutelage with providing the Cochinchinese gentry the means for expanding civilization through technical-infrastructure marvels like canals, bridges, roads, and consequently bustling markets.

Modern technology punctuates the text as regular reminder of the Governor General Paul Doumer scheme for a *mise en valeur*.²⁴² Telegraphs, postal services, and motor vehicles are scattered throughout, and the text is bookended by the flashing of two electric lighthouses. For example, Vĩnh Long, a land where “custom, rites and music still preserve the old ways,” nonetheless boasts a hybrid downtown where Catholic institutions, colonial technology, and commerce vie for space, “A church, a convent, a hospital, the treasury, the post, an army base, a market. The ferry boat night and day stops by, the passengers come and go, money in great amounts.”²⁴³ Similar scenes are repeated all over, interrupted by steam whistles ringing from ships and trains, charting the flow of commerce and passengers into the riverports or by rail across the rice paddies. The foreignness of these machines is immediately clear in Nguyễn Liên Phong's unwieldy and macaronic transliterations from the French like *xà lúc* [*chaloupe*] or *xúp-*

²⁴² “Từ khi chánh-soái Đu-Me (Doumer), Đông-dương các việc thêm bề sửa sang. Sài-gòn đến ải môn quan, Hòa xa thiết lộ sầm toan khởi hành.” Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Nam kỳ Phong tục Nhơn vật Diển ca Chú thích*, 202.

²⁴³ “Y quan lễ nhạc lưu tồn cổ phong.”... “Nhà thờ nhà phước nhà thương, Ngàn phòng diển xá binh thương thi triển. Tàu đồ sớm tối ghé liền, Bộ hành lên xuống bạc tiền quá đông.” Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Nam kỳ Phong tục Nhơn vật Diển ca Chú thích*, 318–19.

lê /súp-lê [*souffler*].²⁴⁴ He invokes these modern technologies alongside images of churning seas of travelers, coming and going from city centers to provincial towns and even the far-flung periphery, linking the old markets to modern means of transportation. Take for example *Cần Thơ*, “the wealthiest well” [*thứ nhất mỗi giếng giàu sang*] which presents a snapshot of the provincial capital under colonial modernity

The provincial capital is in Tân An, canals below, roads above, crisscrossed on all sides.
Multistory buildings tidily arranged, curbed sidewalk out front, nice and square.
On the shore they gather in crowds to buy and sell, boats are parked near and far.
The shoreline paved with sloping stone, clean latrines, no hazards for the people.
The roads lit by lanterns, two piers tall and straight.
Ferries large and small come and go, boats from the markets stretch over the routes.
The horns [*súp lê*] ring out now and then, bringing passengers to all ends.²⁴⁵

Nguyễn Liên Phong’s passages on provincial urbanism are paeans to vitality and order, invoking clean lines, square angles, and wide-open spaces that accommodate crowds without sacrificing sanitation. The cleanliness of the latrines here, and elsewhere a concern for stagnation or zootic contamination, reflects the gentry’s adaptation of the colonial vision of public health hammered home by intermittent outbreaks of cholera and pox, also a constant feature of *Talking Business*. *Cần Thơ* was no Paris, to be sure, but Nguyễn Liên Phong presents the reader with something like a Confucian appreciation of Haussmann’s urban ideal: where open air and exposure to light dissolve poisonous miasmas and discourage rebellion.

Nguyễn Liên Phong did not restrict his aesthetic of vitality and energetic circulation to the busy provincial capitals in the rice baskets of the west. In the eastern hinterland, where border spaces are dotted by anemic villages, he depicts positive transformation as an expansion of commerce and busy markets catalyzed by modern technology. For example, in *Thủ Dầu Một* “The villages and shrines, though small, are spiritually efficacious [*hiển linh*]. The markets are crowded, groups flow to and fro, Thủ Market of the old regime now a bus stop. The people sheltered by

²⁴⁴ Macaronic here isn’t to imply that these terms didn’t enter common parlance. An interesting discussion of súp lê can be found at the blogpost “Bến Thành! Súp Lê vội thôi!” on the website for the alumni of Petrus Ky in Australia Club website. “Hội Ái Hữu Petrus Trương Vĩnh Ký Úc Châu,” *Hội Ái Hữu Petrus Trương Vĩnh Ký Úc Châu*, April 9, 2017, <https://petruskyaus.net/ben-thanh-sup-le-voi-thoi-dxt/>. There is some debate whether the term, interchangeable used as súp lê, xúp lê, súp lê, and so on, are taken from the french sifflet (whistle) or souffler (blow), Hồ Biểu Chánh argues for the latter in 1943. Nguyễn Liên Phong puts souffler parenthetically beside the term when he first uses it in the introduction, implying that it wasn’t widely in circulation at this time. There it clearly refers to a ship horn preparing to embark. “Tàu đồ tháng ghé hai kỳ, Xúp lê (souffler) hiệu lệnh vậ thì thổi vang.”; This transliteration is used despite a sinic alternative being available, for example in *Vũng Tàu* *hoà hoàn* [thuyền] is used: Trên bờ sầm sảng huê-tiêu, Hòa hoàn xuất nhập dắc điều đem đi. In *Gò Công* we see a chaloupe: Tước-nguyên chỗ thiết có danh, Giàu sang cũng lắm lịch thanh cũng nhiều. Đường nước không có bao nhiêu, Từ vàm vô chợ rạch đều quanh co. Đã có xà-lúc tàu đồ, Lại thêm Lục-tĩnh tàu to ghé hoài.” Though it has been argued that súp lê referred to the whistle of a train and xúp lê horn of a ship, Nguyễn Liên Phong uses the two interchangeably, for example in *Gò Công* the *My Tho-Saigon Rail* line is being described. “Ngày theo thiết-lộ đường dài, Giáp qua ranh Mỹ một vài ga xe. Hai bên vườn ruộng phủ che, Súp lê xe thổi chúng nghe om trời.”

²⁴⁵ “Châu-thành sở tại Tân-an, Dưới kính trên lộ dọc ngang tư bề. Phố phường lầu cát chỉnh tề, Phía tiền một dãy bực lê thẳng ngay. Trên bờ buôn bán đông dầy, Dưới thì ghe cộ đậu dầy ngoài trong. Lài lài đá cần mé sông Cầu tiêu sạch sẽ dân không hiểm nghèo. Đường thì đèn thấp sáng đều, Cầu tàu hai chỗ cao hều thẳng bằng. Tàu đồ lớn nhỏ lẳng xăng, Ghe đồ các chợ giảng giảng nẻo đường. Súp lê kêu gọi thường thường, Rước đưa đưa rước các phương bộ hành.” Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Nam kỳ Phong tục Nhơn vật Điển ca Chú thích*, 374.

heaven and earth, a crowded and ostentatious scene of beauty.”²⁴⁶ Likewise in the more populated Saigon suburb of Hóc Môn, busy roads bring a booming economy and civilian contentment, “Its products are betel and tea, people are diligent, households at work. Waves of carts haul past, waves on shoulder poles, waves haul by hand. Piled to the ceiling to be ready to sell, the villages shop at Wholesale Market. Betel is sold all four seasons, the people race to get rich.”²⁴⁷ All over the colony he shows the movement of goods and people as a sign of social flourishing, implying a compatibility between an orthodox Confucian perspective which equated economic plenty with good governance, and the French objective, however hesitant and compromised, for a grand *mise en valeur*.

Nguyễn Liên Phong historicizes this compatibility by depicting the colonial growth of rural markets and infrastructure as an extension of Vietnamese settler colonization of the Mekong Delta. There are more than forty passages in the text describing commerce and markets. In urban spaces these tend toward impersonal accounts of colonial architecture, institutions and technologies like those described above. In rural spaces, Nguyễn Liên Phong’s ties together the titular *Figures and Folkways* by centering markets which link the gentry to local agricultural products and colonial infrastructure. He places colonial commercial circulation into the precolonial history of canal digging. So, for example, he praises virtuous Nguyễn era role model Nguyễn Phước Vân of Vàm Châu Phê for driving out Tây Sơn and Khmer armies, establishing military plantations and digging canals to aid in troop maneuvers.²⁴⁸ He uses the same language to describe the colonial collaborator Trần Bá Lộc’s suppression of Võ Duy Dương’s anti-French rebellion in Đồng Tháp. According to Nguyễn Liên Phong, French and Vietnamese alike ridiculed Trần Bá Lộc’s plan to dig canals to partially drain the swamp, “fearing the wasted effort, even commonfolk [thiên hạ] ridiculed the squander.” Nevertheless, his success appears as a new chapter in the saga of Vietnamese southward expansion.

How great the Đồng Tháp Mười, east west north south now open!
 Tân An, Sa Đéc its borders, canals and settlers in the hundreds of thousands.
 Heaven granted wealthy land, only opened with man’s great labors.
 Agriculture is the foundation of human well-being, to profit man, is to earn eternal fame.
 To crisscross the swamps with levies, to rely on rice and fish, is to live with leisure.
 Great France’s reign over the land, thanks to the viceroy spills over to all.
 In the past were military plantations, of which the Xoai Tu Market remains.
 Intent on opening the Ten Towers with canals and connect the residents to traffic.
 The great mandarin Nguyễn Tri Phương with absolute and upright authority set the borders.
 He worked late and rose early, for love of the people and nation, and steadfast loyalty.
 His canals didn’t make it here, but Trần Bá Lộc after him has succeeded.²⁴⁹

²⁴⁶ “Các nơi thôn xã miếu đình, Qui mô tuy kém hiên linh cũng nhiều. Chợ đông người nhóm dập dề, Chợ-thù nguyên trước cựu triều Bến xe. Người nhờ đất chở trời che, Ngày nay đông đảo cảnh khoe miếu.” Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Nam kỳ Phong tục Nhơn vật Diễn ca Chú thích*, 93.

²⁴⁷ “Thổ sản trâu thuốc với trà, Người người siêng sáng nhà nhà làm ăn. Lốp xe chuyên chở lãng xăng, Lại thêm lốp gánh lốp bung nhảy tràng. Nọc phân trừ dề sảng sảng, Tại nơi Chợ-vừa các làng tới mua, Trâu thuốc bán đủ bốn mùa, Nhơn dân nghệ nghiệp cứ đua làm giàu.” Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Nam kỳ Phong tục Nhơn vật Diễn ca Chú thích*, 137.

²⁴⁸ Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Nam kỳ Phong tục Nhơn vật Diễn ca Chú thích*, 245.

²⁴⁹ Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Nam kỳ Phong tục Nhơn vật Diễn ca Chú thích*, 307.

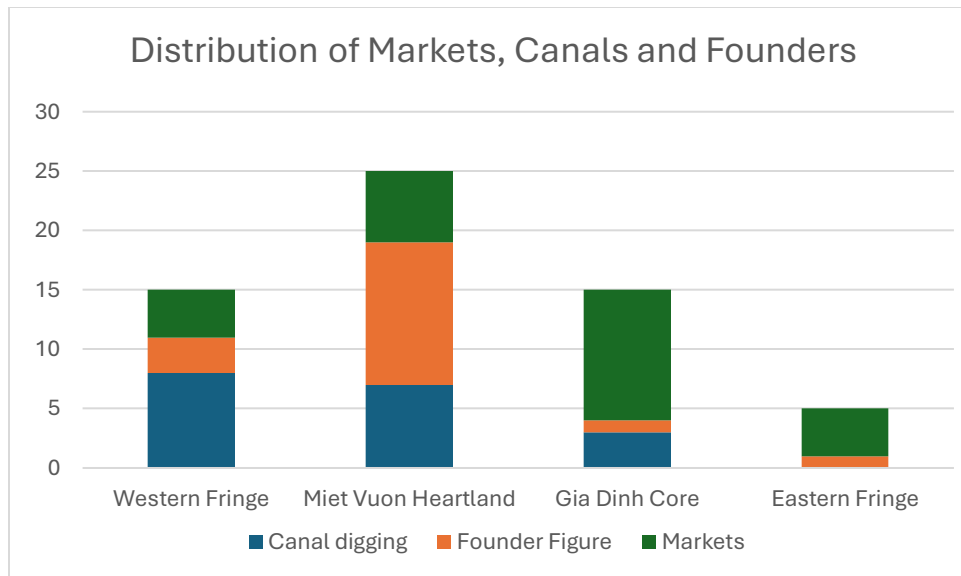
Unsurprisingly, Nguyễn Liên Phong concentrates narratives of canal development, village founder figures, and rural markets in the Orchard Heartland. He recounts a history of colonial military logistics opening onto a period of economic prosperity under the Franco-Nguyễn D tente.²⁵⁰ He often anchors these stories in multigenerational pioneer lineages, beginning with the founders of villages and markets, whose children and grandchildren today serve as village administrators and canton chiefs. Together such passages connect the modern colonial state to the Confucian virtues exemplified by first generations of Vietnamese settlers.

In so doing, Nguyễn Liên Phong maintains the religious vocabulary present in the other major themes. Village founding, and even market founding, was itself an activity of spritual significance, and the tombs of market founders became sites of local village and super-village feasts and rituals. Two especially large rural markets, Tr ng B ng and Th  Đ c, are singled out in the text for such an extraordinary spritual significance.²⁵¹ But, just as with the canal above, many smaller local markets anchor the gentry lineage of canton chiefs and other members of the rural elite.²⁵²

²⁵⁰ For example, in Vĩnh Long where bandit suppression and canal digging founded a broader marriage network of village and cantonal officials: “B nh Trung canton, Trung Hung village, there is a canton chief whose reputation endures to this day. His name is Nguyễn Văn Phi, a servant of the nation, diligent and upright. He captured bandits on numerous occasions and dug the M r p S c canal on which the people all depend. He comes from a house of honest stock, his father was Ch  B u, whose legacy has long endured. His eldest son, Nguyễn B i, served as village teacher with capable skill. In life he possessed extraordinary vigor, a gallant spirit and chivalrous bearing that yielded nothing to the ways of old. Nguyễn B u and Nguyễn B i, both men have since departed for the realm of the dead. Nguyễn Phi afterward carried on the family legacy, continuing the enterprise of father and elder brother, all three virtuous and worthy men. Phi additionally married well, his father-in-law being Đ  V n Tu n. Tu n served as canton chief of B nh Trung, upright and honest, an example to his generation. On his side and on his wife's side alike, both shine with distinction — pure as ice, lustrous as jade, truly a house of quality.” Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Nam kỳ Phong tục Nhơn vật Di n ca Ch  th ch*, 344.

²⁵¹ In Tr ng B ng a founder who dug a canal and established the market in 1818 has been deified and continues to spritually ensure the market's continued flourishing. In Th  Đ c, the rennovation of T  Du ng Minh's tomb was a major project of the local gentry, and local rites were performed at the market tomb. Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Nam kỳ Phong tục Nhơn vật Di n ca Ch  th ch*, 110, 132.

²⁵² A sense of such passages can be seen in B o L c Canton of B n Tre, where a multigenerational family of canton chiefs of “true Confucian stock” [th t đ ng nho gia], famous throughout the land for their great dignity [ph m h nh], founded T n Thanh Trung Th n Market. The widow matriarch was a paragon of feminine virtue, while the patriarch Canton Chief Hay was a man “intoxicated by Confucian praxis”. Their sons served as canton chief and deputy canton chief. “B o-l c t ng T n-thanh-trung, C  nh  họ Nguyễn th t đ ng nho gia. Cai-t ng Nguyễn-Hay l  cha, Ti ng ng i ph m h nh g n xa ng i đ n. L p ch  T n-thanh-trung th n, Đ u roi sung t c lưu t n đ n nay. Ng i đ u k u ch  T ng-Hay, V  t  nh n đ c ch ng say học h nh.” Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Nam kỳ Phong tục Nhơn vật Di n ca Ch  th ch*, 274.



These multigenerational lineages anchored the colonial project in the countryside. Nguyễn Liên Phong thereby ties colonial legitimacy to the intersecting dimensions of modern technology, canal infrastructure, gentry patronage, and Vietnamese settler expansion. For example, in the following passage from *Tân An*, where modern colonial infrastructure is juxtaposed to egalitarian rural life and precolonial elites,

The train comes four times a day, the ferry boat a few times a week.
 Here they entertain without discriminating rich from poor,
 cockfights and gambling the village way.
 Ki-Son, Nhựt Tảo in the thousands, paddy land overflows into Gò Công.
 Ki-Son once had a rich man, he was called Mr. Hóng, all remember his name.
 His fame will live long, who could forget Mr Hong's canal?
 Old regime literati, like Cữ Cần, Cữ Kiện, their wealthy households continue today.
 Among their grandsons and daughters, an excellent few are in Bình Hiệp village.²⁵³

Mr Hóng was an early settler who aided Nguyễn Ánh during the Tây Sơn War by digging a canal. Cữ Cần and Cữ Kiện were two baccalaureates in the Nguyễn imperial administration who fled the south in resistance to the French conquest as part of the “flight of the mandarins.” But at some point long before 1909 they had returned. During this golden age of colonial collaboration, Nguyễn Liên Phong could count even erstwhile anti-French rebels among celebrated members colonial elite of Gò Công. He did so to anchor the colonial project into the illustrious lineage of loyal Cochinchinese subjects of the Nguyễn. Whether it involved the rare entrepreneurial pursuits, or the more common piecemeal extension of landed estates into village sized haciendas,

²⁵³ “Xe-lửa bốn buổi ghé hoài, Tàu-đò tuần lễ đặng vài ba phen. Ăn chơi bất luận sang hèn, Đầu kê đồ bát thói quen trong làng. Kì-son, Nhựt-tảo khắp ngàn, Ruộng tốt đầy tràn giáp tới Gò-công. Kì-son trước có phú ông, Kêu là ông Hóng người đồng nhớ tên. Hầy còn tiếng để lâu bền, Rằng kinh ông Hóng ai quên đặng nào. Các nhà khoa mục cựu-trào, Cữ-Cần, Cữ-Kiện, phú hào lưu lại. Nay còn con cháu gái trai, Tại làng Bình-hiệp có vài người liêm.” Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Nam kỳ Phong tục Nhơn vật Diễn ca Chú thích*, 241–42.

he framed the Orchard Heartland elite as conduits for the conservation and expansion of traditional relations.²⁵⁴

Across this section, I showed that Nguyễn Liên Phong punctuates the text with modern infrastructure, historicizes colonial canals and markets as continuations of Vietnamese settler colonization, and uses multigenerational gentry lineages to bind the old loyalist literati to the colonial present as way to absorb the Doumer-era *mise en valeur* into a fundamentally precolonial Vietnamese framework. Nguyễn Liên Phong legitimized the colonial project by extending the precolonial moral order with French technology and capital. The pre-World War I Cochinchinese elite, in his rendering, were supervising the most recent contribution to a centuries-long Vietnamese civilizational expansion.

Conclusion

For Nguyễn Liên Phong, a single value system governed Cochinchina, applicable with little modification to Vietnamese villages, Khmer pagodas, Catholic parishes, Chinese temple festivals, and French colonial offices. He evaluated civilizations by their degree of institutional order, understood as well-maintained sacred and civic spaces, regular ritual observance, educational transmission, and harmonious hierarchical relations. Nguyễn Liên Phong assimilated icons of colonial modernity, including canals, railways, telegraphs, and steamships, into a narrative of Vietnamese southward expansion, in which Doumer's *mise en valeur* appeared as the latest chapter in a civilizational project stretching back to Nguyễn-era canals and military campaigns. The Franco-Nguyễn Détente rested on the gentry's ability to hold in tension their loyalty to the Nguyễn imperial legacy with their appreciation for the developmental achievements of the colonial state and a circumscribed admiration for European culture and technology. The Cochinchinese elite's worldview was not the ideology of a "minor social revolution" which saw marginal and deracinated *lumpen* classes catapulted to authority by French patronage. Instead, Nguyễn Liên Phong articulates the worldview of an old elite reading new phenomena into an inherited framework.

Within this worldview, the Chinese occupied a pivotal yet ambiguous position. Nguyễn Liên Phong cast them as exemplars of commercial solidarity and institutional discipline whose success, in his eyes, shamed Vietnamese entrepreneurial timidity. They were also a source of social and spiritual disorder threatening to lead his poorer and more naïve countrymen astray. Despite his recognition of the Chinese problem, the contradictory faces of the Chinese presence remained unconnected in Nguyễn Liên Phong's account. No single framework bound together their business acumen, their secret-society rackets, and the French toleration of their commercial

²⁵⁴ For example, in Ba Tri, Bến Tre, Nguyễn Hữu Long, the son of tri phu Dương, invested in buses to taxi passengers and paperwork the 35 kilometers back and forth from the provincial capital. "Compliments to brave Mr. Long, who spent much indeed. He grows daily in reputation. Now that the work is complete, his profits are gradually multiplying." Or Canton Chief Nhiệm in the Cầu kho area of Chợ Lớn, who founded a series of shops, and two "tidy ships" which travel between his establishments. "What use is discussing success and failure, if one doesn't abuse it in an inhumane way. Among Vietnamese who competes in business like him? For a thousand years his reputation will evoke nostalgia." The most illustrative example of the hacienda extension model is Huyện Thạnh Village and Ất éch Market of Trà Vinh which was founded by Lâm Quang Châu. His son, landowner Lâm Quang Phước, whom Phong calls "of second tier wealth after Lê Phát Đạt," is championed for investing 20 thousand piasters of his own money in a joint project with the colonial government to gravel a road leading to the market. This appears to be the Great Great Grandfather of the famous Vietnamese American writer Andrew Lam.

monopolies. Nguyễn Liên Phong recognized that the Vietnamese gentry were doubly subaltern, subject to French political authority and to Chinese economic and moral leadership; but *Figures and Folkways* depicts this condition dispassionately, without seeking a resolution. The text's value system was flexible enough to praise both anti-colonial rebels and colonial collaborators under a shared standard of Confucian virtue, but that flexibility prevented anyone from wielding it against an adversary. It set out a worldview that could celebrate the whole of the Cochinchinese social landscape, but it was not a political program.

Although *Figures and Folkways* appears first in this dissertation, it was not a pre-political document from which the political press later emerged. Nguyễn Liên Phong began writing the gazetteer in 1902, the same years that Lương Khắc Ninh wrote his “big business” [*đại thương*] editorials in the Saigon newspaper *Talking Business*. It was published in 1909, just as Gilbert Chiếu's Enlightened Renewal Movement spectacularly unraveled. *Figures and Folkways* maps the gentry's civilizational geography, honors its exemplars across both pillars of the Franco-Nguyễn Détente, and situates the colonial condition within a history of southward expansion of Confucian moral ordering. Lương Khắc Ninh's *Talking Business* conceptualized a solution to the Cochinchinese elite's double subaltern status: mobilize capital, shame Vietnamese inaction, and challenge Chinese businesses in the Colonial Council. Where the gazetteer conserved the gentry's cultural common sense as a coherent civilizational narrative, it took a newspaper to translate that common sense into actionable proposals.

Part one of this dissertation has established the environmental setting (chapter two), the social composition (chapter three), and the worldview (chapter four) of the Orchard Heartland Gentry. The remaining chapters track how members of this collectivity attempted to translate their shared convictions into coordinated commercial and political action. Many of the same figures and families celebrated in *Figures and Folkways* and *Verses of Homage* reappear in subsequent chapters as shareholders, subscribers, and organizers of the publishing ventures, joint-stock companies, and reform movements that defined gentry public life from 1901 to 1909. Part two traces how the gentry articulated this worldview into political demands, following Lương Khắc Ninh's “big business” program in the pages of *Talking Business* (1901–1905) and Gilbert Chiếu's Minh Tân Movement (1906–1909).

Chapter 5- Talking Business Over Tea: Lương Khắc Ninh and the *Đại Thương* Program 1901-1906

On August 1st, 1901, Corsican salt monopoly contractor, freemason, and “*indigénophile*” François Canavaggio joined forces with a Mekong Delta ministerial clerk turned elected official named Lương Khắc Ninh to establish the first Vietnamese-language business newspaper. They named it *Talking Business Over Tea* [*Nông cổ mìn đàm*, hereafter *Talking Business*]. “After 20 odd years here,” Canavaggio wrote on the front page of the debut issue, “I have come to love the Southern Country as though it were the Old Country, to love the Southern Man no less than the Western Man, I yearn for business to thrive, to birth great profits, which we together can enjoy. [...] Korea, Japan, Siam, even the Great Qing, all of them have newspapers, but our Six Provinces, a land filled with heroes and great intellects, stands idle with arms folded not competing for profits.” Lương Khắc Ninh, whom I argue below was the paper's principal intellectual force, amplified Canavaggio's call in an adjacent column,

All that is needed, gentlemen, is for you to judge whether you find our magazine agreeable, and if so, to do a great service for all our native brethren [người bản quốc ta] by encouraging others to read it, and to persuade them that big business [đại thương] is the principle means to bring about a wealthy people and strong country [dân phú quốc cường]. Allow me, gentlemen, to state our objective: we wish for natives to build industry and commerce capable of matching the Chinese and Indians. These foreigners live in distant lands, yet when they hear about opportunities in our country, they endure hardships without hesitations to seek profit; shouldn't we men in our own country be willing to take advantage of such opportunities? If we truly desire success, how can we let ourselves be deterred by concerns over failure?²⁵⁵

Talking Business thus began with a call for Franco-Annamite collaboration against an onslaught of immigrant Asians. It ran from 1901 to 1924, becoming one of Cochinchina's longest-lived privately owned Vietnamese-language papers, and its lifespan frames a discrete golden age of Vietnamese colonial collaboration. The relative peace stretching from the late 19th century to the mid 1920s formed a Cochinchinese *Belle Epoque*. This was the age of *Talking Business*, when an old Mekong Delta elite steeped in Confucian gentility joined forces with a new class of French-educated Vietnamese colonial administrators to pursue a program of national strengthening, alongside personal enrichment, as part of the elite's fantasy of benevolent colonial development. Lương Khắc Ninh summarized this program with the slogan “wealthy people strong country” [dân phú quốc cường — 民富國強], a twist on the Meiji “wealthy country strong army” [*fukoku kyōhei* 富國強兵] which decenters the military. He quotes the *Classic of Changes* and invokes the Qin-era merchant-statesman Lü Buwei to encourage readers to invest in his companies, implying he was addressing a readership erudite enough to be persuaded by these references.

From humble beginning in 1901, *Talking Business* became the center of Cochinchinese Vietnamese intellectual life. The paper propagated the political ideas and artistic movements of the turn of the century, until a new generation of iconoclasts in the francophone press overshadowed it during the interwar period. But before it became a Cochinchinese social

²⁵⁵ “Nông cổ nhật báo tự tự,” *Nông Cổ Mìn Đàm*, no. 1 (August 1, 1901), 1; “Thương cổ luận,” *Nông Cổ Mìn Đàm*, no. 1 (August 1, 1901), 2., NCMD 1, 8/01/1901, p1; *Thương cổ luận*; NCMD 1, 8/01/1901 p2.

institution, *Talking Business* began as the personal project of two figures whose peculiarities shaped the nascent paper's political orientation. This chapter contextualizes the birth of the paper in the careers of its two founders, François Canavaggio and Lương Khắc Ninh. After introducing these figures, and in Lương Khắc Ninh's case situating the founding of *Talking Business* among his broader political interests, the chapter closes with an analysis of the paper's founding years, under Lương Khắc Ninh's management from 1901 until Gilbert Trần Chánh Chiêu took control in 1906.

A close account is necessary because scholars have given the paper's founding years little sustained examination. Anglophone scholarship has treated it either as an afterword to what? or a brief preface to later developments.²⁵⁶ Vietnamese-language scholarship has paid closer attention to the figures involved but has tended to read them as avatars of anti-colonial resistance, either in the patriotic idiom of midcentury communist historians or in the rehabilitative work of post-Renovation scholars seeking to reinterpret once-scorned "bourgeois collaborators" as patriotic entrepreneurs.²⁵⁷ Both bodies of scholarship have made this dissertation possible, but the current historiography is contradictory and offers no systematic account linking the content of the paper,

²⁵⁶ See Chapter 1 of this dissertation for a more comprehensive account. In short, Milton Osborne's classic briefly touches *Talking Business* in the closing chapter on the "triumph of *quốc ngữ*." Unfortunately, he completely mistranslates the title as "Tribune of the Old Agricultural People" and jumps directly to Gilbert Chiêu's brief stint as editor in 1906. He misses the founding years guided by Lương Khắc Ninh. See: Osborne, *The French Presence in Cochinchina and Cambodia: Rule and Response (1859-1905)*, 168. David Marr, perhaps following Osborne, also mistranslates the title as *Tribune of Old Agricultural People*, and claims it was founded by Nguyễn An Ninh's father, Nguyễn An Khương, see Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism 1885-1925*, 144.; Philippe Peycam's otherwise excellent study on the birth of Vietnamese political journalism, which is chiefly focused on the interwar period growth of the "oppositional public sphere" in the Francophone press, nonetheless devotes a small section to *Talking Business* (which he translates as "Matters of Agriculture"). He too misidentifies "the famous capitalist Gilbert Trần Chánh Chiêu" as the first editor in chief and claims that the paper took a "daring anti-colonial line". He also states that Chiêu gave Lương Khắc Ninh and Nguyễn Chánh Sắt their start. The opposite is, in fact, the case, though it matters little for Peycam's theses, which focus on later decades. See Peycam, *The Birth of Vietnamese Political Journalism*, 102.

²⁵⁷ The first category are writers working in Saigon under the Republic of Vietnam (1955-1975). These scholars were most interested in the Southern branch of the 1908 Reform Movement and published historical essays in scholarly journals or anthologies. Most notable is Sơn Nam, whose work forms the basis for much of the later scholarship, but there are other important and lesser-known contributions. These scholars were ferociously anti-colonial and were seeking to tell a story of anti-colonial resistance, they therefore emphasized connections to anti-colonial activities outside the colony, even when the connections were tenuous at best. See: Sơn Nam, *Phong trào Duy Tân ở Bắc, Trung, Nam: Miền Nam đầu thế kỷ XX-Thiên địa hội & cuộc Minh Tân: biên khảo* (Nhà xuất bản Trẻ, 2014); Bao La Cư Sĩ, "Việt Nam Trên Đường Giải Phóng," *Văn Hoá Nguyệt San*, no. 52 (July 1960): 692; Phạm Long Điền, "Vai Trò Của Nông Cổ Mín Đàm Trong Phong Trào Duy Tân Miền Nam," *Bách Khoa*, no. 425 (1975): 23. The second category consists in scholars researching and publishing in the post market reform context of contemporary Socialist Republic of Vietnam. This second category has a revisionist position toward previous orthodox doctrinaire Marxist accounts which wholly dismissed the contributions of these figures as bourgeois collaborators and backwards feudal landlords. Partially as a reaction against this previous narrative, and partially because they are publishing during a period when market reforms have emphasized a "multi element economy" [kinh tế nhiều thành phần] in which capitalists are expected to contribute alongside the worker, peasant, soldier alliance under party leadership, these scholars have emphasized the patriotic and reformist elements of these figure, while downplaying or wholly ignoring their collaboration with the colonial power. Phạm Phúc Vĩnh, *Phong trào Minh Tân ở Nam Kỳ: đầu thế kỷ XX* (Nhà xuất bản Hồng Đức, 2019); Nghĩa Trần Viết, "Tư tưởng trọng thương của Lương Khắc Ninh trên tờ Nông Cổ Mín Đàm," *Tạp chí Nghiên cứu Lịch sử*, no. 6 (2014): 45–53; Lưu Hồng Sơn, "Tư Tưởng Minh Tân Của Nguyễn Chánh Sắt," *Tạp Chí Khoa Học Xã Hội*, no. 7 (2011).

under its founding managers François Canavaggio and Lương Khắc Ninh, to the political program of Pre WW1 Cochinchinese elites.

This dissertation resolves the historiographical impasse by demonstrating elite continuity from the late nineteenth century into the interwar period. To recapitulate part one, once the French had pacified the Nguyễn Court in the late 1880s, anti-colonial militancy had no viable outlet, and widespread colonial accommodation became the norm.²⁵⁸ Even figures who had previously been, or would go on to become, anti-colonial stalwarts came to terms with colonization during the first decades of the 20th century. This chapter begins Part Two, which shows that Vietnamese patriots under French colonial tutelage set out an anti-Chinese and anti-Indian immigrant program of economic development by founding Vietnamese firms and civic and financial institutions. I argue that Lương Khắc Ninh was the one who first articulated this political program. A political and intellectual representative for the Orchard Heartland Gentry, Lương Khắc Ninh used his recurring column "Commercial Discourses" [*thương cổ luận*] to push a single program: the pooling of native capital into modern firms capable of displacing Chinese and Indian immigrants from the colonial economy. The chapter contextualizes the birth of this program in the careers of the paper's two founders, the Corsican rubber baron, salt merchant, and freemason François Canavaggio, and the Mekong Delta ministerial clerk turned councilor Lương Khắc Ninh, before analyzing the paper's founding years, from 1901 until Gilbert Chiêu took control in 1906.

François Canavaggio and the political economic context

François Canavaggio was born on April 1st, 1862, in Campo, a sparsely populated township in Corse-du-Sud département of Corsica.²⁵⁹ He enlisted in the colonial infantry and arrived in Saigon, a 22-year-old, on the 24th of February 1885, just in time for the overlapping crises of the Si Votha Rebellion and the Save the King revolts in Annam. Like many of his generation, French and Vietnamese alike, military service during the rebellions of the mid-1880s was career defining: Canavaggio served in the counterinsurgency in Cambodia and later in the pacification campaigns in Phú Yên, and the men who fought alongside him, including many Cochinchinese Vietnamese militiamen, leveraged these bonds into political office and wealth.

With the worst of the revolts subdued, François's life, like the life of the colony more broadly, pivoted from military to civilian pursuits. He received his discharge in July 1887, took up a position in the Ministry of Public Works, and married a Vietnamese woman, "Dang Thi Hoi" [sic]. In 1895, he left the administration to devote himself to the cultivation of areca, betel, banana, coconuts, and especially rubber, at a newly purchased plantation in the Linh Chiểu Tây hamlet in Thủ Đức. He was a pioneer of the Cochinchinese rubber industry, planting trees from the first batch imported into the colony in 1898; his holdings grew from just 200 trees in 1908 to more than 16,000 by 1916.²⁶⁰ Like many of his fellow settlers, he bid for colonial land

²⁵⁸ of this dissertation. of this dissertation.

²⁵⁹ Alain Léger, "François Canavaggio," https://www.entreprises-coloniales.fr/inde-indochine/Francois_Canavaggio.pdf; Unless otherwise noted, biographical information drawn from "Le Décès de M. François Canavaggio," *L'Écho annamite: organe de défense des intérêts franco-annamites* (Saigon), April 27, 1922, 325th ed.

²⁶⁰ "Plantation Canavaggio," *Annales des planteurs de caoutchouc de l'Indochine*, no. 50 (1st trimester 1916), 83.

concessions, and by 1910 had also acquired 300 hectares of paddy land, which he rented out to Vietnamese tenant farmers.²⁶¹

Canavaggio matched his private commitment to growing the estate with a cultivated public persona. He served two terms as a Colonial Councilor, sat as Vice President of the Colonial Council in 1906–07, and founded a French language newspaper, *Le Colon*, in 1905. He was also a founding member of the *Syndicat de la Presse*, of which he was vice-president until 1922, when he died from kidney disease, ceding his place to the conservative nemesis of colonial reformism: Chavigny de Lachevrotière.²⁶² But Canavaggio, unlike Lachevrotière, sat on the left wing of colonial political life. He was a founding member of the *Ligue des Droits de L'Homme de Saigon* in 1903 and a founding brother mason of the *Loge les Fervents du Progrès* from 1905.²⁶³ He narrowly won a seat to the Saigon municipal council in 1908 thanks to the unanimous electoral support of naturalized Vietnamese, though the colonial administration subsequently annulled the results because of his associations with Gilbert Chiêu and the "Reform Movement." In the words of Ernest Outrey, then Governor of Cochinchina, Canavaggio was "independent, yet quite mixed up in partisan struggles. He tended to transform general issues into personal ones."²⁶⁴

From this sketch I can draw a rough picture of the French elements which left a mark on the early 20th century Vietnamese politics of Talking Business. It was more Republican than Catholic, since anti-clericalism was a chief preoccupation of the colonial Masonic lodges. It was more civil than military, since Canavaggio's entrance into public life coincided with the growth of the civil government in the late 1880s. Canavaggio also represents the first currents of a movement among colons (French settlers) who saw Vietnamese as natural allies in the colonization of Indochina: Canavaggio stayed in the colony, he married a Vietnamese woman, had children, and died in the colony. Lachevrotière's eulogy puts it starkly, calling Canavaggio "a precursor to the politics of association" and known as "the seventh Annamite councilor" in the Colonial Council.²⁶⁵ As a rubber pioneer, Canavaggio lent *Talking Business* its reverence for scientific agriculture and experimental new crops. His role managing tenant farmers gave him some familiarity with the traditional agricultural credit system, which Lương Khắc Ninh also attacked. The most formative experience for the paper's tone, however, was Canavaggio's brief role as one of two Indochina-wide official brokers for the salt monopoly. His contract coincided with the founding of Talking Business and shaped the paper's two-pronged emphasis on state contracts and competition with the ethnic Chinese.

²⁶¹ "Colonisation agricole par les européens," *Annuaire général de l'Indochine* (1910), 677.

²⁶² He was also founding member of the *Chambre d'agriculture*, where he sat from 1895 to 1903; a member of the *Syndicat des planteurs de Cochinchine*, a two-term municipal councilor for the city of Saigon from 1903-1907 and 1912-1919; he also served two terms as a Colonial Councilor, the first from 1904-1907, and the second from 1912-1919. In 1906 and 1907 he sat as Vice President of the Colonial Council, and in 1906, 1907, and 1913, he sat on the *Conseil du Gouvernement de l'Indochine*

²⁶³ For Canavaggio's membership in the Human Rights League see *La France d'Asie*, October 1, 1903.

²⁶⁴ *La Cochinchine française* du 13 Avril 1908. CAOM GG3135. Special thanks to Gilles de Gantes for sharing this information with me. On the particularities of the Saigon colon business world see: Gantès, "Le particularisme des milieux d'affaires cochinchinois (1860-1910)."

²⁶⁵ *L'Écho annamite: organe de défense des intérêts franco-annamites*, "Le Décès de M. François Canavaggio"; The best general reference for Franco-Vietnamese collaboration remains, Agathe Larcher-Goscha, "La Légitimation Française En Indochine : Mythes et Réalités de La 'Collaboration Franco-Vietnamienne' et Du Réformisme Colonial (1905-1945)" (These, Université Paris VII, 2000).

The Salt Monopoly

Governor General Paul Doumer's fiscal reforms envisioned the salt monopoly as one of three colonial monopolies, alongside alcohol and opium. Doumer aimed to fund the Indochinese general budget with the transparency needed for bond issuances on large public works, while relying on indirect contributions that circumvented the problem of accurate land surveys and reliable agricultural taxation.²⁶⁶ While scholars have studied the opium and alcohol monopolies at length, the salt monopoly was similarly contentious.²⁶⁷ A decree of 1 January 1898 established the monopoly under direct state management. The state agency purchased salt from producers and resold it to consumers, charging the consumption tax, warehouse surcharge, and registration tax.²⁶⁸

But the monopoly met diffuse resistance which Customs Director Frézouls blamed on three constituencies. First, the salt workers, in his words a "distrustful people and poorly advised by native authorities," initially opposed any agreement whatsoever, but the promise of higher wages soon won them over.²⁶⁹ The second were the local moneylenders whose credit provisions to the saltworks laborers had been sufficiently lucrative so as to secure much of produce for their own sale. The third and most effective obstacle, however, were the Chinese merchants, who responded to the new price by hoarding salt and driving up prices. In anticipation of the monopoly, one Saigon-based merchant alone accumulated 6,000 metric tons, equal to the total annual production of the Bà Rịa Saltworks. The rowdy atmosphere of French colonial politics further complicated matters: Cochinchina's French colons encouraged Chinese speculators, and many of them, like Saigon mayor Paul Blanchy, sought to exaggerate the instability Doumer's policies caused in hopes of sabotaging his plans for the Indochinese Union.²⁷⁰

Talking Business intended to renegotiate the terms of Chinese-Vietnamese economic relations, and Frézouls, in terms quite like *Talking Business*'s own, claimed among the salt monopoly's chief accomplishments that it had struck a blow at what he called unfair Chinese economic power in Cochinchina. He celebrated a "slight crisis in Chinese trade" and lectured that "a nation always has an advantage in getting rid of parasites." Indochina, he concluded, must not be "a colony administered by France on behalf of the Chinese merchants" who "drain Indo-Chinese capital for the benefit of the powerful companies of Canton and Shanghai."²⁷¹

A later section shows how closely Frézouls's words tracked those of *Talking Business*'s founding chief editor Lương Khắc Ninh. For now, I emphasize that, Frézouls's bravado notwithstanding,

²⁶⁶ See Chapter 2 of this dissertation for a general introduction to the Doumer era. for general introduction to the Doumer era

²⁶⁷ For opium see Chantal Descours-Gatin, *Quand l'opium finançait la colonisation en Indochine: l'élaboration de la régie générale de l'opium, 1860 à 1914* (L'Harmattan, 1992); For alcohol see Sasges, *Imperial Intoxication*.

²⁶⁸ Frézouls, director of customs, gives this account in a report appended to Paul Doumer, *Situation de l'Indo-Chine (1897-1901)* (F.H. Schneider, 1902), 131. A more euphemistic account is recounted in Paul Beau, *Situation de l'Indo-Chine de 1902 à 1907* (Imprimerie Commerciale Marcellin Rey, 1908). The first draft colonial histories are in Henri Guernier, *Le Régime Fiscal de l'Indochine* (Imprimerie d'Extrême-Orient, 1909); Jacques Dumarest, *Les monopoles de l'opium et du sel en Indochine* (Bosc et Riou, 1938). More recently, Dominique Niollet, *L'épopée des douaniers en Indochine (1874-1954)* (FeniXX, 1998).

²⁶⁹ Frézouls in Doumer, *Situation de l'Indo-Chine (1897-1901)*, 169.

²⁷⁰ Niollet, *L'épopée des douaniers en Indochine (1874-1954)*, 506. For a detailed study of French settler politics, see de Gantès, "Coloniaux, Gouverneurs et Ministres. L'influence Des Français Du Viet-Nam Sur l'évolution Du Pays à l'époque Coloniale 1902-1914."

²⁷¹ Doumer, *Situation de l'Indo-Chine (1897-1901)*, 171.

the details of this supposed "crisis in the Chinese trade" are far from clear. Canavaggio's own role as official intermediary for the south of Indochina depended on a partnership with one of Cochinchina's wealthiest Chinese merchants, and Frézouls may well have been referring to this merchant's bankruptcy in the passage above.

Dissatisfied with the results by 1900, the administration contracted with François Canavaggio on December 7, 1900 to establish salt depots and retailers in the Cochinchinese and Cambodian interior, and to keep the Chinese "usurers and hoarders" from selling government salt above the fixed price.²⁷² The contract ran from 1900 to 1902, a retreat from direct state ownership that gave the customs administration time to build up its own infrastructure. Canavaggio appears to have conceived *Talking Business* in part to police his monopoly: early issues of the paper carried an advertisement reading,

Canavaggio, owner of *Talking Business*, respectfully announces that he has established salt depots in Cambodia and Cochinchina. His salt is sold at a lower price than state tax price salt. So, if one of his subordinates is selling salt at a price higher than or equal to the state price, please report them to Mr. Canavaggio so that he may punish them and chain them up.²⁷³

To enforce the contract, Canavaggio relied on Ly Dang, a Saigon-based Cantonese cotton and real-estate tycoon, Chợ Lớn city councilor, leading figure of the Cantonese congregation, and a man wanted for extradition by the Viceroy of Canton for his close relations with Sun Yatsen.²⁷⁴ Ly Dang founded the Kong-Chai-Yun company with 50,000 piasters of his own money and 300,000 piasters lent by his brother's companies in Canton and Hong Kong. The decision proved ruinous when the monopoly for southern Indochina returned to direct state management in 1902. I can't say with any precision how this brief stint as the salt monopoly's chief contractor shaped *Talking Business's* editorial line, but the paper's owner established it in part to police his own purchased monopoly rights over the salt market, even as he relied on one of the period's wealthiest Cantonese merchants for capital and enforcement.

In sum, Canavaggio often published articles in the paper, but his intellectual contribution is difficult to pin down. During those early years, Lương Khắc Ninh signed roughly half the articles and Canavaggio the remaining half. Canavaggio could conceivably have written in *quốc ngữ* or had his contributions translated from French, but he almost certainly did not write many of the pieces attributed to him. For example, some installments of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* ran under Canavaggio's signature.²⁷⁵ It is implausible that a salt merchant and former infantryman from southern Corsica produced the first translation of the 14th-century Chinese epic novel into vernacular Vietnamese. Since Lương Khắc Ninh signed most of the entries and other scholars credit him with the first translation of the novel, Lương Khắc Ninh more likely signed Canavaggio's name to his own work. Given these ambiguities, I have tended to view the paper as, for the most part, Lương Khắc Ninh's intellectual product, especially since, as I show shortly, so much of the material reads in distinctively Vietnamese terms that it is difficult to imagine Canavaggio giving much concrete intellectual direction.

²⁷² These are Frézouls' words, Doumer, *Situation de l'Indo-Chine (1897-1901)*, 171.

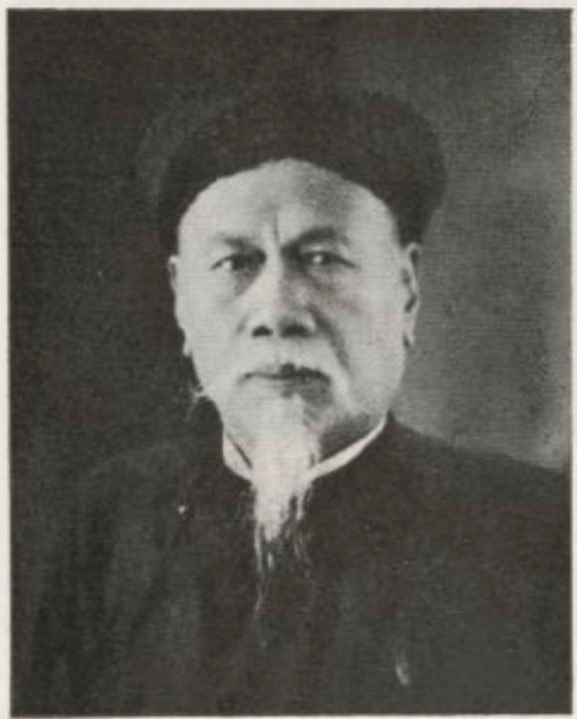
²⁷³ See for example "Lời Rao," *Nông Cổ Mìn Đàm*, no. 1 (August 1, 1901), 7.:

²⁷⁴ Barrett, *Transnational Webs*, 104.

²⁷⁵ See for example *Nông Cổ Mìn Đàm*, no. 8 (September 19, 1901), 5.

Lương Khắc Ninh and the Political Program

Canavaggio's life frames what historian Milton Osborne called the "heyday of collaboration": the period just after the shift from a military to a civilian regime, and before the interwar failure of anticipated colonial reforms had dashed Vietnamese elites hopes in enlightened colonial tutelage.²⁷⁶ Dying in 1922, Canavaggio didn't live to witness the recriminations of the 20s, the collapse of his family fortune after the Great Depression, and the heroes of the "old colony" become the villains of a militant national movement. Lương Khắc Ninh had no such luck. Ninh's biography traces the vicissitudes of French Cochinchina. He was born in 1862, while the fires of French conquest still smoldered in Saigon, and he died in 1943, two years before the March 1945 Japanese *coup* augured the collapse of the French colonial project in Asia.²⁷⁷ The story of his later life will weave its way through the remainder of the dissertation. I introduce here only what little I have gathered about his early life, before detailing some interventions he made as an elected member of the Colonial Council during his tenure as founding chief editor of *Talking Business*.



Early Life

Lương Khắc Ninh was born in An Hội, what is today the Orchard Heartland provincial town of Bến Tre. His father was a well-respected traditional medicine practitioner who had recently immigrated to the Mekong Delta from an agricultural district just inland from the ancient central region entrepot of Hội An. It's unclear what position, if any, the family took toward the French

²⁷⁶ Osborne, *The French Presence in Cochinchina and Cambodia: Rule and Response (1859-1905)*, 131.

²⁷⁷ Allegedly the fire set to Nguyễn rice stocks was so fierce, that they were still smoldering in 1862, see Prosper Cultru, *Histoire de la Cochinchine française des origines à 1883* (A. Challamel, 1910), 180.

seizure of their home province when Lương Khắc Ninh was five in 1867, but his direct relationship with the colonial state begins at least as early as 1876, when he began attending a French provincial school at age 14. Lương Khắc Ninh's daughter later alleged that the French schools were so unpopular at first that local administrators took to going door to door to pressure families into registering their school age children.²⁷⁸ Whether or not the administrators coerced him, Lương Khắc Ninh excelled at French and *quốc ngữ* and quickly entered the colonial administration. Nguyễn Liên Phong's 1915 biographical dictionary described him as "plump and handsome, refined and scholarly in manner, and intelligent. He had studied little but knew much, with a particular gift for languages. Though he had many wives, they lived together harmoniously under one roof without the slightest discord, and this was because the household discipline was orderly and dignified."²⁷⁹

His entry in the 1943 French *Who's Who* of Cochinchina described at the outset of this chapter records that he served as an accountant at the customs and excise office from 1880 to 1883. He then transitioned to a clerk's position at *tribunal de Bentre* in 1884.²⁸⁰ But he didn't stay in one place for long. A Lương Khắc Ninh is listed in the August 1893 issue of the *Journal Officiel de l'Indochine Française* as an *interprète expeditionnaire auxiliaire 1re classe* at the *Tribunal de Cantho* who was being transferred to the *Tribunal de Travinh*.²⁸¹ Six years later, in August 1899, he received his resignation as *interprète titulaire 2eme classe du Tribunal de Bentre*.²⁸² This matches with his entries in two separate midcentury Vietnamese *who's who* type books, which both list him as working as a court clerk [*thông ngôn toà án*] *Bến Tre*.

No reason is given for his *demission*, but judging from subsequent events, I read Lương Khắc Ninh as having left the administration to pursue a political career. Eight months after his demission, on the 30th of April 1900, the delegates of Mỹ Tho elected him to the Colonial Council.²⁸³ The election ran in two rounds, with 481 villages each casting a ballots. In the first round, Lương Khắc Ninh won a narrow majority, so field narrowed in a runoff which he won decisively 248 to 169. Thus began his career as a representative of the Orchard Heartlands in Saigon for the 1900–1904 term.

²⁷⁸ According to interview with her cited in Nguyễn Duy Oanh, *Tỉnh Bến-Tre trong lịch sử Việt-Nam: từ năm 1757 đến 1945* (Nhà xuất bản Tổng hợp Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh, 2017), 345.

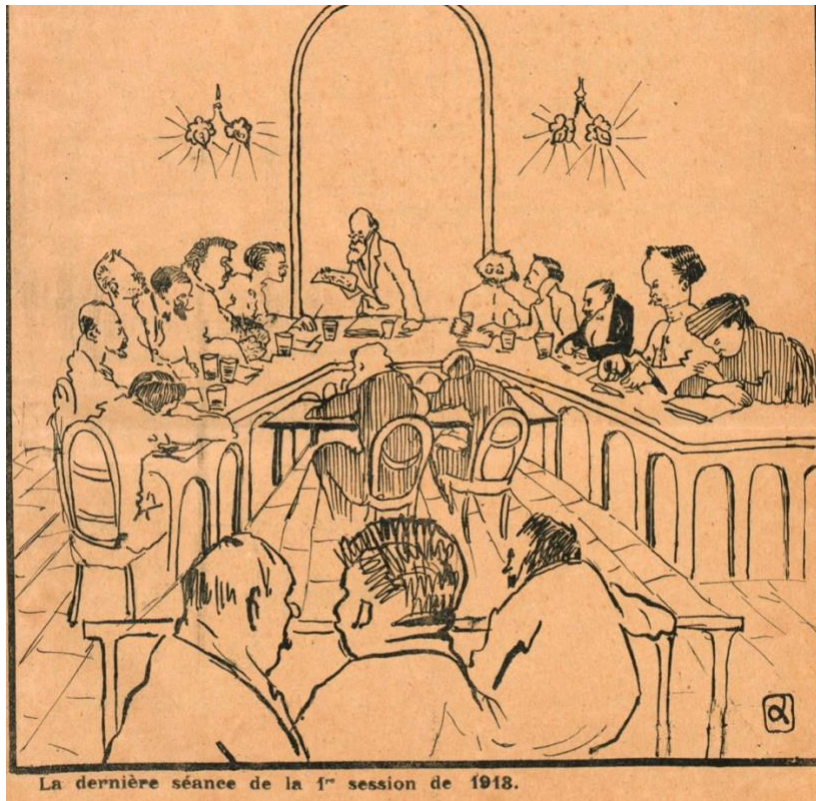
²⁷⁹ Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Điều Cỏ Hạ Kim Thi Tập*, 186.

²⁸⁰ *Souverains et notabilités d'Indochine*, 64. It is not mentioned in Ninh's entry in Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Điều Cỏ Hạ Kim Thi Tập*, 186.

²⁸¹ "'Nominations et mouvements du personnel," *Journal Officiel de l'Indochine Française*, August 7, 1893." *Journal Officiel de l'Indochine Française* (07 Aug 1893)

²⁸² *Journal Officiel de l'Indochine Française*, August 8, 1899. [Page number not available.]

²⁸³ *Journal Officiel de l'Indochine Française*, April 30, 1900, 582. 582.



The Colonial Council

By 1900, the docile Colonial Council had grown into a more boisterous, though ultimately toothless clearing house for native complaints. Lương Khắc Ninh's contributions to the Colonial Council's deliberations, published in minutes and official reports, reveal him as a combative advocate for the indigenous gentry. Like the other native councilors, Lương Khắc Ninh intervened frequently on behalf of colonial functionaries. His first intervention, during the August 1st, 1900 meeting, was to request that indigenous functionaries be permitted to pay their head tax directly to their employers, a demand the Lieutenant Governor threw out for being outside the Council's jurisdiction.²⁸⁴ Such procedural rebuffs were routine, and they shaped relations between councilors and the administration through the period. But Lương Khắc Ninh's fights over education, land and labor, and legal reform give sharper insight into the critical preoccupations of the era's accommodationist politics and the concerns he brought to the foundation of *Talking Business*.

Education: The Paradox of Modernization and Moral Decline

Two examples of Lương Khắc Ninh's education advocacy show what, on its face, appears to be a contradictory pairing of concerns. He on the one hand lamented the collapse of education in the Chinese classics because he believed that it opened a dangerous lacuna in traditional moral instruction, yet he led the campaign for a secular Vietnamese girl's school to compete with an existing Catholic school.

²⁸⁴ *Procès-Verbaux Du Conseil Colonial* (Imprimerie Coloniale, 1900), 44.

Lương Khắc Ninh delivered remarks lamenting the disappearance of Chinese characters during a discussion of teachers' wages in the Franco-Annamite schools.

Please allow me to present some observations on this subject. I should point out to Monsieur le Gouverneur that all of us Annamites of Cochinchina, watch, with much regret, the daily decline of Chinese character instruction. By the very fact that we have lived, for centuries, shoulder to shoulder with the Chinese, in constant intercourse with them, the study of Chinese characters has become, to us, a sort of national education; it is from the Chinese texts that the Annamite children draw the moral principals which are indispensable to their education. The Annamites attach a high value to knowledge of Chinese characters; and yet the teachers tasked with its instruction, in reality, educate the children in wholly different matters. Given these conditions, it would be better to cease budgeting for it altogether.²⁸⁵

When the Lieutenant Governor suggested that vernacular translations might substitute for the originals, Lương Khắc Ninh rebutted that Pétrus Ký (Trương Vĩnh Ký, the pioneering 19th-century quốc ngữ scholar) himself had attempted just such a project, but that even Pétrus Ký "could do no better than provide an explanation, a commentary, since it is impossible to precisely translate characters into vernacular." The so-called Chinese character teachers, Lương Khắc Ninh added, were working as simple *surveillants*, giving perhaps one lesson a month in characters while otherwise managing primary classes. It's unclear whether the problem received further attention, but the case reveals something of the worldview of the early twentieth century loyalist elite. Lương Khắc Ninh represented the Orchard Heartland's first quốc ngữ generation. Later, this chapter details the "anti-Chinese" political orientation of the Cochinchinese loyalist elite, but there was also a countervailing tendency emblematic of the era's ideological orientation: an admiration for the Chinese classics and a corresponding concern for the moral degeneration of the Cochinchinese youth, which the elite understood as arising from the lacunae in moral education that the mass introduction of the Romanized script had opened. These complex, countervailing tendencies are noteworthy because they contrast with the cultural reform movements soon to explode across the North and Central region, which held the Latin script, western learning, and republican government in high esteem. I read much of Lương Khắc Ninh's work as aimed at filling the moral crater left by the decline of Sinitic learning and the imperial kingship. These meant spent their own resources, in Lương Khắc Ninh's case to the point of penury, translating and publishing morality texts which tried to teach the values and ideas of a traditional education. Lương Khắc Ninh saw the Chinese classics as part of what he called an *enseignement national* and, despite the role he played in popularizing the Latin script, he was pessimistic about the potential for replacing Chinese characters with quốc ngữ.

And yet this same man led the campaign for the first secular girl's school — an initiative that took nearly a decade to realize. From Ninh's initial request at the 1901 Colonial Council session, the project appears in commission reports in 1907 and received budgetary approval in 1909, by which time the project had become a major demand of the whole Cochinchinese Vietnamese elite.²⁸⁶ The protracted nature of the campaign shows that the native elite were invested in

²⁸⁵ *Journal Officiel de l'Indo-Chine Française (Saigon)*, November 28, 1901, 1,961., 1,961.

²⁸⁶ *Procès-verbaux du Conseil Colonial* (October 28, 1901), 56; *Procès-verbaux du Conseil Colonial* (October 4, 1902), 7. The school is mentioned again in a November 10, 1906 report to the Colonial Council regarding the jurisdiction of Saigon's schools, which were at that time in a "state of anarchy." *The École de jeunes filles indigènes* is mentioned in the report as a planned institution. *Procès-verbaux du Conseil Colonial* (November 10, 1906), 23. It was decided to finally go through with the plan; the school would be located on Rue Taberd, to make use of the

expanding education to women. They were upset that native families who wanted their daughters educated were turning toward Christianity — a position that also appealed to the *laïque* republican proclivities of French officials. The Lieutenant Governor sentimentally hoped to “widely spread western culture among the girls, who will later raise a generation of *French of the heart*.”²⁸⁷

The pairing of these two initiatives provides insight into the apparently contradictory tendencies of loyalist elite politics. They were unanimously in favor of the expansion of women's education provided by the vernacular script; they were nonetheless pessimistic about its capacity for moral instruction. Both interventions show how the elite used vernacular modernization in defense of traditional moral instruction. Lương Khắc Ninh recognized that the collapse of moral cultivation and requested that the colonial state underwrite their replacement. A similar concern appears in

teachers already employed nearby. It was not until 1909 that a report to the Council announced the completion of the school and requested official budgetary approval. "This issue is especially dear to the heart of our native colleagues. Your commission therefore proposes that you give your full assent to the proposition here submitted to you," announced the president of the Council. Procès-verbaux du Conseil Colonial (September 20, 1909), 38. "Création d'une école des filles annamites à Saigon," L'Indochine Libérale, March 8, 1911, provides a list. Members included: "Do Huu Phuong, Nguyen Thang Hon, Le Van Trung, Le Van Thong, Dinh Son Ly, Nguyen Van Mai, Le Quang Bay, Le Phat An, Vo Thanh Bau, Thai Van Bon, Nguyen Minh Chieu, Diep Van Cuong, Diep Van Cuong [there were two men of the same name], Le Van Duong, Tran Quang Dau, Pham Huu Duc, Nguyen Van Duom, Nguyen Van Giam, Nguyen Huu Hao, Lieu Sanh Hau, Ly Thanh Huy, Huynh Cao Ke, Tran Van Kiet, Ho Van Kinh, Bui The Kham, Luu Van Lang, Truong Van Luong, Maivan, Luong Khac Ninh, Nguyen Van Nguyen, Nguyen Tan Nghiem, Pham Cong So, Dinh Thai Son, Nguyen Tan Su, Lam Quan Tai, Le Phat Tai, Le Phat Tan, Nguyen Duc Tuan, Le Phat Tanh, Phan Chan The, Pham Duy Thieu, Pham Ngoc Thuan, Le Ba Trang, Tran Van Trang, Lam Le Trach, Huynh Quan Vi, Le Van Xung." The included list of committee members is a veritable who's who of the Cochinchinese Vietnamese elite, many of whom, such as Lê Văn Trung and Lê Quang Liêm (Bây), will be dealt with in more detail in subsequent chapters. Lương Khắc Ninh, "former Colonial Councilor and Chief Editor of Luc Tinh Tan Van," is listed as a simple member, holding no office on the executive committee. It is unclear why Ninh did not list himself as a membre suppléant of the Conseil Privé, which he had been since at least December of the previous year, 1910. Bulletin officiel du Ministère des colonies (January 1, 1910), 1,624.1), 56.; Procès verbaux du Conseil Colonial (4 October 1902), 7.; The school is mentioned again in a 10 November 1906 report to the colonial council regarding the jurisdiction of Saigon's schools, which were at that time in a "state of anarchy". The école de jeunes filles indigènes is mentioned in the report as a planned institution. Procès verbaux du Conseil Colonial (10 Nov. 1906). 23; It was decided to finally go through with the plan, the school would be located on Rue Taberd, to make use of the teachers already employed nearby. It wasn't until 1909 that a report to the council announced the completion of the school and requested official budgetary approval. "This issue is especially dear to the heart of our native colleagues. Your commission therefore proposes that you give your full assent to the proposition here submitted to you," announced the president of the council. Procès Verbaux du Conseil Colonial (20 Sept. 1909), 38.; "Création d'une école des filles annamites à Saigon", L'Indochine Libérale 8 March 1911 provides a list. Members included: "Do Huu Phuong, Nguyen Thang Hon, Le Van Trung, Le Van Thong, Dinh Son Ly, Nguyen Van Mai, Le Quang Bay, Le Phat An, Vo Thanh Bau, Thai Van Bon, Nguyen Minh Chieu, Diep Van Cuong, Diep Van Cuong [there were two men of the same name], Le Van Duong, Tran Quang Dau, Pham Huu Duc, Nguyen Van Duom, Nguyen Van Giam, Nguyen Huu Hao, Lieu Sanh Hau, Ly Thanh Huy, Huynh Cao Ke, Tran Van Kiet, Ho Van Kinh, Bui The Kham, Luu Van Lang, Truong Van Luong, Maivan, Luong Khac Ninh, Nguyen Van Nguyen, Nguyen Tan Nghiem, Pham Cong So, Dinh Thai Son, Nguyen Tan Su, Lam Quan Tai, Le Phat Tai, Le Phat Tan, Nguyen Duc Tuan, Le Phat Tanh, Phan Chan The, Pham Duy Thieu, Pham Ngoc Thuan, Le Ba Trang, Tran Van Trang, Lam Le Trach, Huynh Quan Vi, Le Van Xung." The included list of committee members is a veritable who's who of the Cochinchinese Vietnamese elite, many of whom, such as Lê Văn Trung and Lê Quang Liêm (Bây), will be dealt with in more detail in subsequent chapters. Lương Khắc Ninh, "former Colonial Councilor and Chief Editor of Luc Tinh Tan Van", is listed as a simple member, holding no office on the executive committee. It's unclear why Ninh didn't list himself as a membre suppléant of the Conseil Privé, which he had been since at least December of the previous year, 1910. Bulletin officiel du Ministère des colonies (1 Janvier 1910). 1,624

²⁸⁷ *Procès-verbaux du Conseil Colonial (October 16, 1907), 105., 105.*

the next section, where I discuss *Talking Business's* literary program and the Confucian rhetoric of its commercial mission.



Figure 5 The completed girls' school at top, from: *Souvenir de la Cochinchine et du Cambodge*. (L. Crespin, 1922).

Land and Labor

Lương Khắc Ninh also contested the concentration of land and the forced labor regime. He intervened to limit the practice of land grabbing through land auctions, though both he and Canavaggio themselves received land concessions through the Council. During the 3rd session of 1902, Lương Khắc Ninh spoke out on this issue, (though the Council President twice reprimanded him that the subject was not on the agenda), to complain about a recent auction of newly drained former swampland in Mỹ Tho. He complained that the administration had structured the Mỹ Tho auction to defeat its own purpose: after the lot-by-lot sale, a “global auction” for the entire batch had drawn a single buyer at 65,000 piasters, a sum no smallholder could match. “To avoid one evil, we have fallen into an even greater evil,” he told the Council, imploring the administration to prevent “the grabbing of land by a few rich folk [*quelques richards*].”²⁸⁸ Despite the council president's admonitions that Lương Khắc Ninh's request was out of order, the Lieutenant Governor was sympathetic, put it to a vote, and it passed.

Lương Khắc Ninh met with far less success in his campaign against the mandatory labor regime, *corvée*. The colony had adopted this ostensibly native institution during the post conquest decades of martial law and had expanded it as a convenient source of labor power for building projects. During the council's tenth session on August 9th, 1900, the acting council president Claude and the indigenous councilors signed a complaint to the Lieutenant Governor transmitting their constituents' dissatisfaction with abuses of the *corvée* system.²⁸⁹ The crux of the problem was that the administration was no longer reckoning *corvée* days as workdays, but

²⁸⁸ *Procès-verbaux du Conseil Colonial* (April 14, 1902), 25.

²⁸⁹ *Procès-verbaux du Conseil Colonial* (August 9, 1900), 143.

rather as the completion of tasks the provincial governor counted as a day's work. So, for example, if a team was digging an irrigation canal, *n* cubic meters of dirt moved per worker would count as one day of *corvée* labor, no matter whether it took the team just hours, or as seems to have more often been the case, weeks. The councilors' complaint demanded that the five required days be counted as days on site, not as piecework tasks: "not only do the [taxpayers] suffer for the whole duration of the work from every specie of privation," Lương Khắc Ninh explained, "but [since they are taken from working their fields] they leave their families in an even more complete destitution."

The Lieutenant Governor and the French councilor Paris dismissed the demand. Paris was blunt: "If one simply says to the gathered laborers, 'You are here for five days,' then one can be absolutely certain, given the nature of the Annamites, that they will do basically nothing." Neither Claude, who was at the time acting Council President, nor any of the other indigenous signatories spoke up. Lương Khắc Ninh said overseers already drove the laborers hard, enticed by "a substantial bonus" for keeping to schedule. According to Lương Khắc Ninh, Paris's prediction that capped days would mean idleness was "absolutely inexact." As for the suggestion that workers could complain to the Lieutenant Governor directly, Lương Khắc Ninh said that "these men wouldn't dare; one must live beside them to appreciate their capabilities."

Paris was unmoved. "The Annamite is wily, if you allow me the expression, he'll *work* all day without displacing even a quarter cubic meter of dirt." The exchange grew tense. Lương Khắc Ninh alleged that overseers mistreated and beat the workers, and Paris retorted that "one would need a militiaman standing behind each Annamite" to get a day's work out of them. The Council put the demand to a vote and it passed, but the Lieutenant Governor was unmoved: "The Administration doesn't believe it can accede to this demand."

Legal Issues: Gambling and the Indigénat

One non-binding council resolution [*voeu*] involving Lương Khắc Ninh opens a window onto the hostility between Vietnamese and Chinese in Cochinchina, and onto the hands-off approach of the colonial administration that frustrated its native members. In 1902 the native councilors unanimously presented a *voeu* demanding that the administration repress gambling "with the utmost severity." The *voeu* stipulated that Chinese gambling sponsors tycoons? be "submitted to the full force of the law and even expelled after their convictions." It also tasked a brigade of special agents with investigating Chinese gambling operations on the model of the customs office's enforcement of the alcohol and opium monopolies.²⁹⁰

The Lieutenant Governor was taken aback. "Do the native councilors think it practical," he asked, "to extend the Custom office's much hated network of secret informers to other spheres as well?" Council President Cuniac warned that rewards for denunciation would "become encouragements to blackmail," and the Lieutenant Governor concluded with an appeal to common sense: "The native councilors might do well to reflect on the French proverb: the perfect is the enemy of the good."

The native councilors, perhaps intimidated by the mocking tone of the French councilors' rejection, fell silent. It was the sole French signatory, M. Pech, who took up their case,

Everyone is aware how the Chinese make tours of the interior. They arrive on their junks; bringing merchandise or making collections, and once their commercial trip has

²⁹⁰ *Procès-verbaux du Conseil Colonial (October 16, 1902).*

concluded, they organize on board a game of *baquan*. I do not think it at all excessive to compensate the person who warns the Administrator or the Procureur of the Republic of such Chinese, whose junk is anchored at such and such arroyo, and who is in the process of gambling there. [...] It is not a question, as in the case of opium, of encouraging the vile sentiment of denunciation. It's a question of reserving for the informer a part of the confiscation of the Chinese junk, which, under cover of commerce, is an open gambling house. It is by such means that the money flees from our taxpayers. It is in this way that the Chinese drain the interior of the small Annamite economies, all flowing into Cholon, on these junks loaded with medicines, pottery, with other merchandise, and which return, concealing in secret holds oh so many piastres torn from the savings of the Annamites. [...] It is impossible for the Administration to be uninterested in this situation, which is absolutely contrary to the social and economic development of Cochinchina.

The French councilors rallied against Pech. Cuniac cast doubt on the trustworthiness of village notables, and Thiémonge pointed out that the Chinese were simple *compradores* for larger business concerns, important constituents of the French councilors. In the end, the *voeu* was taken into consideration, but stripped of its proposal for a brigade of special agents.

In the same session, Lương Khắc Ninh gave a lengthy speech attacking the moral and strategic basis for extending the *Indigénat*, the policy of native legal status that judged cases according to supposedly "traditional," instead of French, laws.²⁹¹ Lương Khắc Ninh read a prepared speech which took the administration to task for failing to live up to the republican values of assimilation by maintaining backwards native institutions for the sake of authoritarian convenience. Lương Khắc Ninh argued that the 1881 separation of judicial and executive powers had been merely "a platonic concession to a powerful gust of wind blown in from the metropole." Twenty years on, the provincial governor remained the sole authority. Lương Khắc Ninh viewed the full separation of powers as the most pressing policy problem facing the colony, calling it the "best guarantee of equality which can be offered by society to each of its members"

²⁹¹ *Procès-verbaux du Conseil Colonial* (October 16, 1902). The decree on the indigénat was promulgated in Cochinchina in May 1881. It spread to Tonkin in 1890, and when Tonkin and Annam were reorganized in 1897 a version was implemented there. The following year an identical decree was promulgated for Cambodia. Although often thought to have originated in Algiers, the Cochinchinese decree predated the Algerian decree by one month. For a general history of Cochinchinese legal structure, the classic account is in Milton Osborne, *The French Presence in Cochinchina and Cambodia: Rule and Response (1859–1905)* (Cornell University Press, 1969), 74–83 and 110–120. Osborne's wide-ranging study was most concerned with the debates that led to the formal abandoning of Nguyễn legal codes, a decision which he understood to be based in a heavy-handed French civilizing impulse that ran roughshod over the need for cultural pluralism and the maintenance of native institutions. He seems largely unaware of the ways the maintenance of native legal codes might be a means of legal racial discrimination, and he paid little attention to the indigénat, which survived the formal abolishing of native law in 1881 and was applied across the French colonial world. More recent scholarship in French colonial history has focused on this institution, highlighting its role as a repressive system of colonial apartheid. Lương Khắc Ninh's complaints here, while voiced from a position of steadfast colonial loyalism, nevertheless anticipate later scholarly and anti-colonial activist critiques of the institution. See Gregory Mann, "What Was the Indigénat? The 'Empire of Law' in French West Africa," *Journal of African History* 50 (2009), 331–53. For a recent study on the simultaneous multi-sited origin of these policies, see Sylvie Thénault, "L'indigénat dans l'Empire français: Algérie/Cochinchine, une double matrice," *Monde(s)*, no. 12 (2017). The decree on the Indigénat was promulgated in Cochinchina in May 1881. It spread to Tonkin in 1890, and when Tonkin and Annam were reorganized in 1897 a version was implemented there. The following year an identical decree was promulgated for Cambodia. Although often thought to have originated in Algiers, the Cochinchinese decree predated the Algerian decree by one month.

and “the essential condition for obtaining our complete assimilation, to make French of the Heart [*Français de cœur*] of Cochinchina's native peoples.”

Lương Khắc Ninh continued to explain that French legislators had originally conceived the *indigénat* as a temporary instrument of military rule, but that its repeated extensions had “distorted the spirit and sense of the law to give it a character which it didn't have.” Provincial governors were pronouncing sentences of twenty and twenty-five years of forced labor on mere presumptions, without material evidence or regular tribunals. What irked Lương Khắc Ninh most was that provincial governors were declaring sentences at the request of native officials themselves, “the most serious reason driving me to no longer desire this decree.” The solution, for Lương Khắc Ninh, was unambiguous:

Our courts are sufficient, Gentlemen, to hear all possible and imaginable offences, even those which are supposedly special to the natives. I therefore ask for the pure and simple application of French law for them because you will not forget that, when an Administrator applies the decree on *indigénat*, he is judge and plaintiff. I do not think, moreover, that in the 20th century a French Minister would want to affix his signature to a text which disregards, in such a formal way, the true principles of law.

The Council took no action on Lương Khắc Ninh's speech, The Council President, with a hint of sarcasm, promised that the speech would have “its place, and a large place indeed” in the official minutes. The Lieutenant Governor was at pains not to contradict the Republican spirit of Lương Khắc Ninh's intervention, but he observed that other native councilors and their constituents were not asking, “for the introduction of every French institution into Cochinchina, but rather the conservation, the maintenance of what remains of their Annamese institutions and customs.”

The Council and the Press

The way the Lieutenant Governor and the bloc of French colons brushed aside Lương Khắc Ninh's proposals confirms the Colonial Council's reputation as a toothless medium for native political initiatives. Nevertheless, Lương Khắc Ninh's stint in the council launched him on a successful political career as a loyal adjunct to the colonial regime. He went on to serve as a lifelong member of the Governor's privy council, a founding member of numerous mutual study societies and business lobbies, a *chevalier de la Légion d'honneur* and eventually the chief censor for the Vietnamese language press.²⁹²

Lương Khắc Ninh's term on the council offers insight into the political concerns out of which the first privately owned and expressly political Vietnamese language paper grew. The positions Lương Khắc Ninh espoused cut across commonly held assumptions about the political and social cleavages that divided native elite from the colonial state and the native masses. Invoking the idiom “royal authority yields to village custom”, scholars typically understand French law as an alien imposition that disturbed the informal powers of local arbitration that had once sealed the village off from royal intervention. Nevertheless, Lương Khắc Ninh's argument against the *indigénat* inverts these expectations. French provincial administrators were more than happy to indulge in the convenient fiction of “local customs” to justify their own unilateral executive fiat.

²⁹² These include the *Société d'enseignement mutuel de Saigon*, the *Syndicat des études franco-annamites* (1910), the *Société des études indochinoises* (member from 1911), and appointment as *Chevalier de la Légion d'honneur* (1920); he also served as a representative for the colonial exhibition in Marseille (1922). By 1924 he was director of the *Caisse d'épargne de Saigon*, and in 1930—by which time his reputation had transformed from nationalist to what his critics called an infamous *vendu* and *simili patriote*—he became the chief censor for the native-language press.

Elected native representatives like Lương Khắc Ninh, on the contrary saw in French law the republican safeguard against the corrupting forces of excessive personal authority.

The same inversion held for colonial policing. Vietnamese political figures frequently criticized colonial police power. This is particularly true in the case of the alcohol monopoly, which had critics across the political spectrum, from conservatives like Phạm Quỳnh to revolutionaries like Hồ Chí Minh.²⁹³ And yet Lương Khắc Ninh and the native councilors' campaign against Chinese gambling shows that the shoe was occasionally on the other foot. The native representatives unanimously demanded a more repressive state apparatus modelled on the alcohol monopoly's secret police to safeguard the villages from Chinese criminal enterprises. The French, who might be expected to endorse any form of colonial state expansion, were fearful of infringing on the economic interests of settler businesses, which depended on the Chinese. Though colonial officials chafed against Chinese mercantile power and competition, they nonetheless depended on it and were reluctant to expand the police forces for fear of too empowering the Vietnamese.

Talking Business expressed similar concerns. Lương Khắc Ninh's two decades as a court clerk in the Mekong Delta's provincial towns probably inspired his goal of popularizing legal knowledge among Vietnamese. He touted the business campaign as an antidote to the spiraling rural crime he had confronted firsthand. His intervention on land auctions testified to his concern for the concentration of land ownership, which *Talking Business* hypocritically attacked even as Lương Khắc Ninh and Canavaggio themselves benefited from the concessions the council distributed. His educational campaigns, which included women's schooling and Chinese character instruction, bore fruit in the magazine's literary program of translating Chinese texts into the vernacular. *Talking Business* shared these concerns with the schoolteachers, cantonal chiefs, and provincial clerks who formed the newspapers readers and contributors.

Lastly, *Talking Business* was a means for Lương Khắc Ninh and his peers to build up power outside the limits of the Colonial Council. At its best, the council had only budgetary powers and acted on a consultative basis when it came to legislation, which ultimately took the form of executive decree. The French had structured the council to keep native councilors in the minority; they could only effect binding resolutions when they won the sympathy of both French councilors and the Lieutenant Governor. Nevertheless, before the electoral reforms of 1922, councilors were elected by village delegates instead of direct suffrage, which shifted native politics from Saigon to the Mekong Delta and pushed the work of the council toward "pork barrel politics". *Talking Business's* "big business" emphasis on founding civic and business organizations such as mutual aid and study societies, credit and consumer cooperatives, and industrial or commercial concerns, should be understood as a means to more tightly knit together these elites and to better prepared them capitalize on the wealth accumulation opportunities presented by the investment opportunities mediated by colonial construction projects.

Talking Business as Vietnam's First Political Press

Ninh's peers and the colonial regime recognized him as the founder of the first Vietnamese newspaper: the 1920 notice announcing his reception of the Chevalier de la *Légion d'Honneur* praises him for his service as member of the colonial council, the privy council, and as the founder of the first Annamite journal.²⁹⁴ This may appear odd to scholars long accustomed to

²⁹³ Sasges, *Imperial Intoxication*.

²⁹⁴ *Bulletin officiel du Ministère des colonies* (Paris: L. Baudoin, 1920), 2,219. (L. Baudoin: 1920), 2,219.

viewing Trương Vĩnh Ký's *Gia Định Báo* as playing this foundational role. But the vernacular papers that preceded *Talking Business* did not feature editorials with expressly political or ideological messaging.²⁹⁵ Lương Khắc Ninh's use of the press as an organ of political mobilization set *Talking Business* apart and justifies the appellation "political newspaper."²⁹⁶

The only Vietnamese vernacular newspaper in operation when Lương Khắc Ninh arrived in Saigon to begin his term in the Colonial Council was the state-owned and operated *Gia Định Báo*. Lương Khắc Ninh teamed up with then Saigon municipal councilor and salt monopoly farmer Canavaggio and started *Talking Business*, which Governor General Paul Doumer authorized on 14 February 1901. Lương Khắc Ninh and Canavaggio saw themselves as locked into an international and inter-ethnic rivalry that they would lead through the press and play out in the market, a perspective Lương Khắc Ninh's opening-issue column "Commercial Discourses" makes clear. This column, with minor name adjustments and a few brief absences, spanned his tenure as chief editor. It was an expressly political column which criticized perceived national failures and advocated for Lương Khắc Ninh's vision of a solution: the formation of native-owned business firms and the moral education of a native capitalist class capable of pushing immigrant commercial enterprises out of Vietnamese markets. Whatever the feasibility of such a campaign, this expressly political agenda sets the paper apart from its predecessors, making it a pivot point in the formation of Vietnamese mass politics.

During the foundational years of Lương Khắc Ninh's tenure as chief editor, *Talking Business* was a weekly: it appeared each Thursday in eight pages, each sheet divided into two columns. Two elements stand out: its centerpiece, Lương Khắc Ninh's recurring column "Commercial Discourses" and its literary works.

Commercial Discourses

Lương Khắc Ninh most forcefully and consistently articulated his program in a recurrent column, "Commercial Discourses" [thương cổ luận]. It was the centerpiece of the newspaper. Only nine of the first 150 issues lacked an installment. He only took two breaks, one taken to attend the 1902 Colonial Exposition in Hanoi.²⁹⁷ The column typically ran over a page, and discrete arguments often spanned across months-long series of issues. It's also clear that the series continued past the July 1904 issues, which I haven't been able to consult. Lương Khắc

²⁹⁵ The vernacular papers which preceded *Talking Business* served variously as instruments of administrative communication and literary experimentation, but none featured expressly political editorials. *Gia Định Báo* (1865–c.1910), founded at the initiative of the colonial admirals and dependent on the contributions of Petrus Trương Vĩnh Ký and Paulus Huỳnh Tịnh Của, promulgated practical information and published "entertaining stories" for use in the Franco-Annamite schools; colonial councilors in the 1880s already mocked it as "pointless." Trương Vĩnh Ký and Trương Minh Ký's *Thông loại khoá trình* (1888–89, 18 issues) was an expressly pedagogical instrument — the first privately owned Vietnamese newspaper and the first vernacular literary magazine, but short-lived. *Nam Kỳ* (1897–1900, 155 issues), published by the colonial print magnate Schneider, featured world and local news alongside literary columns, including Chinese stories, translations of foreign tales, and the first *feuilleton* (Nguyễn Du Hoài's *Đố ngộ cổ nhân, tương đàm thực ký*, issue 78, 27-4-1899), but no political or ideological editorials. On the literary development of these early papers, see Trần Nhật Vỹ, *Văn Chương Sài Gòn 1881-1924* (Nhà xuất bản Văn hoá - Văn nghệ, 2017), 10–11, 80, 96–136; Nguyễn Văn Trung, *Hồ Sơ về Lục Châu Học - Tìm Hiểu Con Người ở Vùng Đất Mới*; Bùi Đức Tịnh, *Những Bước Đầu Của Báo Chí, Truyện Ngắn, Tiểu Thuyết và Thơ Mới (1865-1932)* (Nhà xuất bản Tổng hợp Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh, 2020).

²⁹⁶ Peycam, *The Birth of Vietnamese Political Journalism*.

²⁹⁷ See "Bồn quán cáo thiệp," *Nông Cổ Mìn Đàm*, no. 78 (February 26, 1903); and "Thương cổ trí luận," *Nông Cổ Mìn Đàm*, no. 92 (June 4, 1903)., "NCMD 78. (26 Feb 1903). And "Thương cổ trí luận," *NCMD* 92 (4 June 1903).

Ninh's treatises meandered for hundreds of pages, entertaining a wide variety of ideas and complaints without a single sustained argument, making it difficult to summarize the "Commercial Discourses" as a whole. Still, every entry revolves around the primary objective of promoting "big business" [đại thương]. But what did Lương Khắc Ninh mean by "big business"? In what follows, I suggest that the answer is inseparable from his effort to legitimize a modern capitalist program in Confucian moral vocabulary. In the process, he developed a theory of Vietnamese poverty and immigrant exploitation that found wide currency among the Cochinchinese elite.

Lương Khắc Ninh states his primary objective at the outset, emphasizing Talking Business's singular focus on the promotion of big business to achieve national wealth in competition with foreigners,

"All that is needed is for you, gentlemen, to read our journal, and it will daily be made clear that big business is the chief means to build a *wealthy people and a strong country*.²⁹⁸ Ask yourselves, gentlemen, is it not the case that when the common man is wealthy, the nation together shares in his wealth, and when the common man is poor, it is impossible for the nation to grow wealthy. In the founding issue of this journal, I would like to share a few words with you all, gentlemen, to clarify that we wish for nothing else but for the natives of this country to enjoy the benefits of commerce and industry, so we can compete with Chinese [*Khách*] and Indians [*Thiên-trước*].²⁹⁹

What Lương Khắc Ninh means here by "big business" is clear. Examples in the early issues show that he is not imagining the bootstrapping entrepreneur. Rather, he is advocating a collective gentry project of incorporation for the purchase of state contracts. Two successful examples of "big business" make this evident: the Saigon-Cholon tramway and the *Messageries Fluviales*.

The twin cities of Saigon-Cholon once boasted Southeast Asia's largest urban tramway network. The first line ran along the "high road" north of the cities from 1881; a "low road" along the Ben Nghe creek followed in 1891, and other spurs stretched into the suburbs through the first decades of the twentieth century.³⁰⁰ Lương Khắc Ninh invoked the tramway as an example of what he framed as Vietnamese business cowardice.

Allow me to refer to one commercial endeavor which has long been established right in our face, which is flourishing, which returns ten times profits on investment, and which I haven't seen a single person analyze, not a single Annamese has bought even the smallest share, that is the Saigon Cholon Tramway. [...] This is a shareholder funded company [...] and a few wealthy Vietnamese had even bought shares, but when it came time to build the tracks, they were startled, feared the profitability, and sold their shares to the Chinese or the French, and now not a single Annamese is invested!³⁰¹

The third issue provides another case study, this time of the *Messageries Fluviales* -- the riverine steam transport company founded in 1881 which plied the Mekong from Cochinchina to Laos.³⁰²

²⁹⁸ The phrase "wealthy people, strong country" [dân phú quốc cường 民富國強] will be discussed below.

²⁹⁹ Lương Dù Thúc, "Thương cổ luận," *Nông Cổ Mìn Đàm*, no. 1 (August 1, 1901), 2.1), 2.

³⁰⁰ For colonial public works in general see Brocheux and Hémery, *Indochina*, 128. For Indochinese rail see Tim Doling, *The Railways and Tramways of Việt Nam* (White Lotus Press, 2012).

³⁰¹ Lương Dù Thúc, "Thương cổ luận," *Nông Cổ Mìn Đàm*, no. 1 (August 1, 1901), 2–3.1), 2–3.

³⁰² The *Messageries* supplemented its passenger traffic with colonial postal contracts, and though technically a private company, was a vital agent in colonial state expansion into the Siamese border region. For an important

Ninh took great pains to emphasize that the state contracts were vital to the success of the company, “I described the shipping company as a big business, but haven’t yet identified the source of its profit. Let me explain, gentlemen, this shipping company doesn’t earn income solely on its passenger traffic, but also carries post and commodities all over the country, so that even the state must pay it a set amount each year.”³⁰³ What angered Lương Khắc Ninh most was that the state had left Vietnamese empty-handed while a Chinese merchant from Mỹ Tho named Yen Seng had boats built in Hong Kong and bought the contract on a number of routes. “Is it right that all the profits should lie in the hands of foreigners? I beg you please to show some sympathy for the children of Annam, who have been born and raised in a cavern full of gold, but who, during an afternoon nap, have allowed some wayfarer to clean them out!”³⁰⁴

Not all the examples were state-contracted public works or services. Lương Khắc Ninh occasionally expressed a grander vision of an integrated system of rice mills, pawn shops, and consumer cooperatives, much like the project envisaged by the Minh Tân Movement a few years later.³⁰⁵ None of Lương Khắc Ninh’s examples, however, trafficked in a mythos of the plucky individual small businessperson with a modest sum of capital who, through hard work and dedication, expands a small business into a fortune. The chief problem for Lương Khắc Ninh lay in pooling capital among the already rich and spreading risk, not in individual diligence or rags-to-riches. For Lương Khắc Ninh, his readers’ unwillingness to invest stemmed from cultural defects in the Vietnamese psyche which only new formal institutions and a cultivated business-oriented culture could overcome.

But such a diagnosis exposes a broader contradiction in Lương Khắc Ninh’s Confucian modernization program. On the one hand, he frames his program in distinctively traditional terms. He introduces the paper with references to the *Classic of Changes* and justifies his program by invoking the 3rd century BCE merchant statesman Lü Buwei.³⁰⁶ *Talking Business’s* slogan, “wealthy people strong country” [*dân phú quốc cường* — 民富國強], is also revealing. The phrase echoes a passage attributed to Sima Qian describing Fan Li’s governance of Yue, where “the people were wealthy and the state was strong” and the kingdom prevailed over its rival.³⁰⁷ Whether Lương Khắc Ninh knew the original references or picked them up from contemporary Chinese or Meiji thinkers, he appropriated the formula to legitimize capitalist social relations and to valorize the traditionally despised figure of the merchant. He placed the wealth of the people, not the enrichment of the state or the strengthening of the army, at the center of national revival. One installment illustrates the way he frames his program in terms of

account which places the *Messageries Fluviales* in the distinct business world of Cochinchina see Gantès, “Le particularisme des milieux d’affaires cochinchinois (1860-1910).”

³⁰³ Lương Dù Thúc, “Thương cô luận,” *Nông Cổ Mìn Đàm*, no. 3 (August 15, 1901), 2.

³⁰⁴ Lương Dù Thúc, “Thương cô luận,” *Nông Cổ Mìn Đàm*, no. 3 (August 15, 1901), 3.

³⁰⁵ Lương Dù Thúc, “Thương cô luận,” *Nông Cổ Mìn Đàm*, no. 39 (May 22, 1902), 2.

³⁰⁶ Lương Dù Thúc, “Thương cô luận,” *Nông Cổ Mìn Đàm*, no. 1 (August 1, 1901), 2.1), 2.

³⁰⁷ Taiping Yulan 太平御覽, 人事部一百一十三 (Human Affairs, ch. 113), “富下,” quoting Taishigong 太史公, Suwang miaolun 素王妙論. Chinese Text Project, accessed May 2, 2026, <https://ctext.org/post-han?searchu=民富國強#n385649>, 人事部一百一十三, “富下,” quoting 太史公《素王妙論》; the text is accessible <https://ctext.org/post-han?searchu=民富國強#n385649>

the Five Constant Virtues [ngũ thường 五常]: benevolence [nhân 仁], righteousness [nghĩa 義], propriety [lễ 禮], wisdom [trí 智], and faithfulness [tín 信].³⁰⁸

Wouldn't it be more benevolent to sell a few thousand shares, amass several million piasters in capital, and engage in profitable commerce, so we can rinse us natives of our poor reputation and bring profits to the country? Those with capital would benefit, and those without capital would find work. Those with skills would find high paying and leisurely employment, and those without skills could work hard and make a wage, they would be able to take care of themselves and of their wives and children without having to suffer the indignity of slavery to the foreigners: to the Chinese [khách] and Indians [Thiên trước], the foreign ne'er-do-wells [bộ] who come from abroad to make a living here.

A similar rhetorical question characterizes the other virtues: is it not righteous to unite with your countrymen? Is it not propriety to form an accountable board of directors and is it not wisdom to maintain transparent ledgers? Is it not faithfulness to operate with a clearly delineated division of labor and roles? Lương Khắc Ninh's key to a national renaissance was the modern firm, an organization which embodied the classic virtues of the Confucian mandarin, rather than the entrepreneur as folk hero of free enterprise.

Lương Khắc Ninh's plan contains two contradictions. The more glaring and fundamental, is that he leaves the French out of his condemnations of rapacious foreigners. It is tempting to speculate that he harbored secret anti-colonial intentions, and some of his phrasing seems to imply as much, but he remained a devoted servant of the French empire until his dying day. Here this dissertation parts most sharply with the post-Renovation Vietnamese scholarship, which, in its eagerness to rehabilitate Lương Khắc Ninh as a patriotic precursor to socialist developmentalism, has tended to read his mercantilist program as a veiled anti-colonial stance.³⁰⁹

A more subtle contradiction lies in Lương Khắc Ninh's conservative modernism: the modern firm fits traditional values, but those same traditional values led to Vietnam's backwardness in the first place. For example, in the first installment of *Commercial Discourses*, Lương Khắc Ninh blames "national habits" [*tục quen trong nước*] for the absence of Vietnamese "big business." Over the course of the first 150 issues, similar "negative customs" come to encompass a series of perceived behavioral and psychological deficiencies: short-sightedness, gambling addiction, jealousy, indolence, and an exaggerated valorization of superficial ranks and accolades.³¹⁰ For Lương Khắc Ninh, these all contribute to a lack of trust that dissuades Vietnamese from purchasing shares in Vietnamese-owned companies.

³⁰⁸ Lương Dù Thúc "Thương cổ luận" *NCMD* 85 (24 April 1902), 2. The Vietnamese scholar Trần Viết Nghĩa also helpfully singled out this installment, but he mistakenly cites issue 35. See Nghĩa, "Tư tưởng trọng thương của Lương Khắc Ninh trên tờ Nông Cổ Mín Đàm."

³⁰⁹ See the conclusion of this dissertation for more detail. Vietnamese scholars have recently sought to resuscitate Ninh as an anticolonial figure, but Ninh's heartfelt letter to the Governor General ruing Vietnamese racial immaturity and ungratefulness, written in the more rebellious 1930s, is an especially poignant refutation of any supposed anti-French feelings. For rehabilitations of Ninh see Phạm Phúc Vĩnh, *Phong trào Minh Tân ở Nam Kỳ*. For Ninh's letter see "Dossier relatif à l'engagement de M. Luong Khac Ninh pour le contrôle de la Presse indigène et aux manifestations contre son troupe théâtral années 1926-1931" 25650 *TDNK*, TTLTQG2.

³¹⁰ See for example Lương Dù Thúc, "Thương cổ luận," *Nông Cổ Mín Đàm*, no. 7 (September 12, 1901), 3. *MD* 7 (12 Sept 1901), 3.

Lương Khắc Ninh blames the traditional economic system for encouraging unproductive and usurious lending to tenant farmers and for discouraging risk-taking among the wealthy. To him, this violates the virtue of benevolence [*nhân*] because it breaks the bonds which ought to exist between rich and poor, bonds which investment in industrial operations would better serve by providing labor for the idle classes. “It is the wealthy who give rise to banditry among the poor.”³¹¹ Instead of investing in productive enterprise, the wealthy care only for themselves “having encountered an era of change, when the people have lost loyalty, the rich are bitter and have lost faithfulness. If the wealthy have a full stomach, it is enough, is this not narrowminded and stubborn?” Put another way, “the rich worry only about themselves, and the poor are driven to wild risks.”³¹² Lương Khắc Ninh saw the firm as more than a corrective to degenerate morality. For him, it was a humanitarian initiative that would reduce poverty and fight crime. “Think ahead, take your small savings and invest it with us, it would be like purchasing a good reputation for your countrymen, and for yourselves, the foreigners would no longer call us stupid, and we would also make great profits, profits for your children to enjoy from that small investment you have today.”³¹³

Lương Khắc Ninh also sees the benevolence of his program in the way it rescues the poor from the indignity of laboring for foreigners. Nearly every installment of *Commercial Discourses* complains about foreigners, but one passage stands out for the pathos with which he argues his case.

How pitiful are the Annamite men and women who dig up their native land and form the mud into bricks for the Chinese to sell. For a hard day’s work, the man makes four cents, the woman three. Examine, gentlemen, is it not our land being dug? Are these not our people molding the bricks, stacking them in the furnaces with the kindling chopped by our lumberjacks from our trees, and are they not being sold to our people? The Chinese [chú Khách] just sits there like a king! [...] Examine closely, were we born to be slaves to Chinamen [chêc]? It’s our land, our wood, our labor, our money, but the Chinaman [chú chêc] makes all the profits.³¹⁴

Moving as this rhetoric is, Lương Khắc Ninh's concrete proposals were confusing, capricious, and largely came to nothing. Many articles make haphazard suggestions, exploring the potential of such diverse ventures as a match factory, a castor oil plant, or silk cultivation.³¹⁵ A few articles mobilize campaigns for specific ventures, none of which appear to have panned out. In issue three, a column signed by Canavaggio called “grain enterprise” responds to high rice prices by pitching the readership on an investment scheme: “The rice mills in Chợ Lớn are on tenterhooks, we estimate they've already lost 200,000. This opportunity would be a shame for us Annamese to pass up. If we combine forces of one mind, there is no reason we will lose to the Chinese.”³¹⁶

³¹¹ Lương Dù Thúc, “Thương cô luận,” *Nông Cổ Mìn Đàm*, no. 7 (September 12, 1901), 4.01), 4.

³¹² Lương Dù Thúc, “Thương cô luận,” *Nông Cổ Mìn Đàm*, no. 12 (October 17, 1901).01)

³¹³ Lương Dù Thúc, “Thương cô luận,” *Nông Cổ Mìn Đàm*, no. 13 (October 24, 1901).01).

³¹⁴ Lương Dù Thúc, “Thương cô luận,” *Nông Cổ Mìn Đàm*, no. 15 (November 7, 1901), 2.1), 2.

³¹⁵ Canavaggio, “Giá thảo súc vật,” *Nông Cổ Mìn Đàm*, no. 5 (August 29, 1901), 2; Canavaggio, “Hiệp bản tài thọ,” *Nông Cổ Mìn Đàm*, no. 8 (September 19, 1901), 6.), 2; Canavaggio, “Hiệp bản tài thọ” 8 *NCMD* 8 (19 Sept. 1901), 6.

³¹⁶ Canavaggio, “Mề Cuộc,” *Nông Cổ Mìn Đàm*, no. 4 (August 22, 1901), 1. Note that even though Canavaggio signed the article, he refers to “us Annamese.” I believe most of the articles signed Canavaggio were written by Ninh, particularly since most of the translations of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* are also signed Canavaggio. that even though the Canavaggio signed the article, he refers to “us Annamese”. I believe most of the articles signed

Ten issues later, a new column appeared, "Pooling Capital for Big Business," which began systematically proposing a mix of related endeavors.³¹⁷ Issues described the structure of the company, established the need for transparent accounts and clearly defined roles, and then laid out the business plan. First, they would purchase pawn shops as credit institutions. Once they had accumulated sufficient capital, they would establish a rice-purchasing cooperative which would give membership discounts and build off its close relationship to the gentry. In the fourth installment, Lương Khắc Ninh announced that he would take a tour of the countryside to sell shares, but the campaign seems to have ended there.³¹⁸ Installments of Commercial Discourses a year later were still advocating the founding of pawnshops, but the sense of a formal proposal was absent.³¹⁹ One hundred issues later, a new column titled "Establishing a Commercial Enterprise" replaced "Commercial Discourses," beginning a new proposal to establish a construction company which would "build houses and bridges for the government or any wealthy man in Cochinchina."³²⁰ It would have an initial investment of 500,000 piasters and sell 5,000 shares for a hundred piasters each. The following issues published the corporate charter in full, with Lương Khắc Ninh again planning to tour the countryside to drum up investment.

The extant issues of *Talking Business* do not tell us whether he sold a single share. Lương Khắc Ninh picked an inopportune moment for his tour. The catastrophic typhoon of May 1904, and the consequent epidemics of cholera and zoonotic outbreaks, devastated the Cochinchinese economy for two years. Although the disaster undermined Lương Khắc Ninh's commercial program in the short term, it taught the Orchard Heartland gentry the need to diversify their investments and embrace the business movement. As the next chapter shows, this energy would find its channel in *Talking Business's* next chief editor, the controversial Gilbert Chiếu.

Literature

Even if Lương Khắc Ninh's investment schemes found no takers, he oversaw the development of a literary program which proved far more durable. His literary agenda offered an indirect solution to the crisis of moral education he could not resolve through the Colonial Council. He devoted considerable energy to expanding a trail that Trương Vĩnh Ký and others had blazed in previous publications. With *Talking Business*, these efforts bore fruit, leading to the colony's first public poetry competitions and the first Vietnamese vernacular short stories and novels.

Talking Business's literary content began in the first issue, with Lương Khắc Ninh's translation of the 14th century Chinese epic *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. As in China, these stories held an almost sacred place in Vietnamese popular consciousness, forming the basis for popular operas, cults, and common idioms. Since the Vietnamese intelligentsia had historically been literate in Chinese, Lương Khắc Ninh's rendering was the first translation into Vietnamese, making the adventures available to the new generation of colonial clerks who tended to be at best

Canavaggio were written by Ninh, particularly since most of the translations of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* are signed Canavaggio.

³¹⁷ Lương Dù Thúc, "Đại thương hiệp bốn cách," *Nông Cổ Mìn Đàm*, no. 12 (October 17, 1901), 3. (17 Oct 1901), 3.

³¹⁸ Lương Dù Thúc, "Đại thương hiệp bốn cách," *Nông Cổ Mìn Đàm*, no. 15 (November 7, 1901), 3. (7 Nov 1901), 3.

³¹⁹ Lương Dù Thúc, "Thương cổ luận," *Nông Cổ Mìn Đàm*, no. 40 (May 29, 1903), 1.3), 1.

³²⁰ Lương Dù Thúc, "Lập thương cuộc," *Nông Cổ Mìn Đàm*, no. 142 (May 26, 1904), 1. 1904), 1.

quasi-literate in Chinese script.³²¹ The translation found a wide readership: already by the fifth issue on August 29th, 1901, the front page bore a notice reading, "It is forbidden to reprint *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* in other books, neither is it allowed to reprint it as a standalone text" — presumably bootleg copies had already begun circulating within only a few weeks of publication.³²²

Talking Business also published other translations from popular Chinese texts, including numerous episodes drawn from Judge Bao, and especially the *Liêu trai chí dị*, also known by its English title *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* [聊齋誌異].³²³ *Strange Tales* was a 17th century compilation of ghost stories laden with moral lessons. These stories were popular in Vietnam, and celebrated literary figures, including Nguyễn Chánh Sắt, Tản Đà, and Đào Trinh Nhất, would later translate partial standalone editions. Like *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, the stories from *Strange Tales* formed the basis for popular operas and folk tales, as well as the repertoire of narrative elements that later colonial authors of the 30s and 40s would develop into the "Forest Trails" [đường rừng], a pulp horror adventure genre. Lương Khắc Ninh and other guest contributors appear to have produced some of the first vernacular translations, scattered across the early issues of *Talking Business*.³²⁴

Chinese-to-Vietnamese vernacular translation that dominated the Cochinchinese publishing industry for the first decade of the 20th century and launched the careers of the period's key literary figures.³²⁵ What is perhaps more important, however, is that such a project of translation

³²¹ In the biographical dictionary analyzed in chapter 3, *Verses of Homage*, of the 225 unique entries, 40% (92) are mentioned as having any familiarity with Chinese characters [chữ nho/nhữ]. 21 of the 92 are remarked as only have superficial knowledge [sảo biết]. Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Điều Cổ Hạ Kim Thi Tập*.

³²² "Lời Rao," *Nông Cổ Mìn Đàm*, no. 5 (August 29, 1901). The series ran continuously for the first 150 issues; I have unfortunately been unable to consult issues 151–417 to determine precisely how many installments were published continuously for the first 150 issues; I have unfortunately been unable to consult issues 151–417 to determine precisely how many installments were published.

³²³ For "Judge Bao" see Lương Dũ Thúc, "Nghe tiếng mà luận án," *Nông Cổ Mìn Đàm*, no. 18 (November 28, 1901), 7. ản án" *NCMD* 18 (28 Nov. 1901) 7.

³²⁴ See the commentary by literary critic Cao Việt Dũng. Nhị Linh, "Nhị Linh: Liêu Trai Chí Dị," *Nhị Linh*, October 23, 2015, <https://nhilinhblog.blogspot.com/2015/10/lieu-trai-chi-di.html>; Nhị Linh, "Nhị Linh: Vàng và Máu: Một vị Trí," *Nhị Linh*, June 10, 2015, <https://nhilinhblog.blogspot.com/2015/06/vang-va-mau-mot-vi-tri.html>; I was unable to determine whether translations appeared in the shortlived newspapers that preceded *Talking Business*. Regarding *Talking Business*, Cao Tự Thanh has made a partial list: "Lương Dũ Thúc, *Thương người khác thể thương thân*, *Ghét người khác thể vun phân cho người*, số 5,6,7, ngày 29.8, 5 và 12.9.1901 chính là bản dịch truyện *Thủy Vân*, quyển IV; *Chuột hầy còn có nghĩa*, *người há chẳng làm nhon*, số 8, ngày 19. 9. 1901 chính là bản dịch truyện *Nghĩa thư*, quyển XIII; *Nghĩa khuyên*, số 9, ngày 26.9.1901 chính là bản dịch truyện *Nghĩa khuyên*, quyển XIV. *Tác thiện thiên giáng chi bá tướng*, số 19 và 20, ngày 5 và 19.12.1901, chính là bản dịch truyện *Thủy mãng thảo*, quyển II; guest submissions include: Lương Hòa Quý, bài *Lộng nguyệt thành tiên*, số 25, ngày 23.1.1902, chính là bản dịch truyện *Hồ Tử thư*, quyển II; Khuyến Thiện đạo nhân, bài *Hoành tài bất phú*, số 49, 50 ngày 31.7 và 7. 8.1902, chính là bản dịch truyện *Nhiệm Tú*, quyển II; Nguyễn Chánh Sắt, bài *Chuyện Hồng Ngọc*, số 51 và 53, ngày 14 và 28.8.1902, chính là bản dịch truyện *Hồng Ngọc*, quyển III. *Chuyện thần hoa*, số 128, ngày 11.1.1904, chính là bản dịch truyện *Hoa thần*, *Phụ lục V*, quyển XVI; and Nguyễn Đoàn Khai, bài *Phi ngư*, số 142, ngày 26.5.1904 chính là bản dịch truyện *Ngư phi*, quyển XIV." Cao Tự Thanh completed the most comprehensive translation of the *Strange Tales* in 2006. See Bồ Tùng Linh, *Liêu trai chí dị* tập 1, trans. Cao Tự Thanh, (Nhà xuất bản Văn Hoá: Sài Gòn, 2006). He catalogued the above list in his article "Vài bản dịch Liêu trai chí dị đầu thế kỷ XX ở Lục tỉnh," *Tạp chí Hán Nôm* 4 (1996)

³²⁵ Besides already mentioned Nguyễn Chánh Sắt, who would serve as chief editor in 1919 during the Anti-Chinese boycott, and Nguyễn Liên Phong, who was the subject of chapters 3 and 4 and who is considered a founding figure of Vietnamese Reform Opera (Cải Lương), other important figures who began in this fashion include Nguyễn Khắc

pushed the boundaries of Vietnamese vernacular prose to represent complex aesthetic and political ideas. This was the indirect approach to the problem Lương Khắc Ninh had raised in the Colonial Council when he objected to the misappropriation of funds for Chinese character teachers in the Franco-Annamite provincial schools. Trương Vĩnh Ký and Paulus Của's earlier attempts at translating morality texts, Confucian primers like the *Minh Tâm Bửu Giám* 明心寶鑑 had proven too pedantic to attract a wide readership. Lương Khắc Ninh, perhaps from financial necessity, found a way to convey traditional morals through more entertaining means. *Talking Business* had to stay in business to propagandize Lương Khắc Ninh's campaign for national business strengthening, and middlebrow Chinese stories about ghosts and swashbuckling rebel commanders were the ideal vehicle to do both while expanding the capacities of the Vietnamese vernacular and reinforcing folk morals.

Talking Business was also a turning point in the growing industry of original vernacular poetry and fiction. In addition to the letters to the editor mentioned above, which contributors almost always submitted in verse, Lương Khắc Ninh promoted 6/8-meter odes [*vịnh*] which versified on local histories or praised places for their beauty. The most prominent example is the work of Nguyễn Liên Phong, which chapters three and four treat at length. Over the course of Lương Khắc Ninh's tenure, contributions became more formal. In May 1902, he initiated the first public vernacular poetry competition by encouraging "literate and talented gentlemen from near and far" to submit responses to the verse "A young nun leaves the convent" [*thanh ny hồi tục*].³²⁶ Lương Khắc Ninh chose this verse as an inversion of The old whore becomes a monk, itself drawn from the celebrated feud between the literati colonial collaborator Tôn Thọ Tường and the anti-colonial holdouts Phan Văn Tri and Huỳnh Mẫn Đạt. That the first Vietnamese vernacular public poetry competition plays upon the ambiguities of colonial collaboration and traditional virtues accords with the themes of dual loyalty and accommodation which pervaded the period I call the Franco-Nguyễn Détente. The competition succeeded, attracting 49 unique author submissions within the first three months, including future chief editor of *Six Provinces News* Nguyễn Hữu Hạnh, author of the first *feuilleton* Nguyễn Dư Hoài, famous translator Trần Phong Sắc, founding father of Vietnamese reform opera Tống Hữu Định, and the celebrated poet Đặng Lễ Nghi.³²⁷

Talking Business soon grew into the colony's premier literary publication. Until the founding of *Six Provinces News* [Lục Tỉnh Tân Văn] in 1907, it was the sole venue for publishing poems and short prose fiction. This odd literary distinction for a paper named *Talking Business* would persist long after Lương Khắc Ninh left.³²⁸ Thus, although founded to advocate political and economic

Huê, Đặng Thúc Liêng, and Nguyễn An Khương, father of celebrated revolutionary radical Nguyễn An Ninh. For later periods, see Peycam, *The Birth of Vietnamese Political Journalism*.

³²⁶ "Quảng thi văn," *Nông Cổ Mĩn Đàm*, no. 39 (May 22, 1902).

³²⁷ Trần Nhật Vy, *Văn Chương Sài Gòn 1881-1924*, 10–11.

³²⁸ On the development of the Vietnamese novel before and after *Talking Business*, the earliest Vietnamese prose short stories appear to have been written by Trương Minh Ký and published in *Gia Định Báo* in 1881; Trần Nhật Vy has collected 23 of what he judges to be "mediocre stories" published in *Nam Kỳ* in 1899 under the heading "amusing chats" [*tiếu đàm*]. See Trần Nhật Vy, *Văn Chương Sài Gòn 1881-1924*, 80, 96–136. Trương Vĩnh Ký's *Kiếp phong trần* (1882), written as a morally edifying dialogue between two students, and the first intentionally modernist vernacular novella, *Truyện thầy Lazaro Phiền* (Saigon, 1887), written in Algiers by a Vietnamese student, also deserve mention as precursors, though the latter was something of an outlier and was not emulated for nearly twenty years. During his brief stint as chief editor of *Talking Business* in 1906, Gilbert Chiếu opened what appears to be the first Vietnamese vernacular novel competition; only a single entry was received, which was awarded a cash prize

interests, *Talking Business* straddled a choke point in turn-of-the-century Cochinchinese vernacular publishing. Briefly the only venue for Vietnamese language publishing in Cochinchina, *Talking Business* marked a transition period between vernacular translations from Chinese to short fiction and eventually novels.³²⁹

Conclusion

It isn't clear exactly how Lương Khắc Ninh's work with *Talking Business* came to an end. One of Vietnam's first novelists Lê Hoàng Mưu, who at the time was a student at Saigon's most prestigious secondary school Chasseloup Laubat, reminisced that colonial councilor and friend to Lương Khắc Ninh, Diệp Văn Cương, whom the colonial administration had informally tasked with censoring *Talking Business*, became so meddlesome that Lương Khắc Ninh left the paper. This seems plausible: as part three shows, the paper's next editor Gilbert Trần Chánh Chiêu chaffed against Cương, and the colonial state destroyed him. Lê Hoàng Mưu also hints that Lương Khắc Ninh had disagreements with Canavaggio.³³⁰ But perhaps neither of these rumors were true. After all, in 1906 Lương Khắc Ninh began a career as a member of the Governor of Cochinchina's Privy Council, perhaps the highest indigenous office in Cochinchina. Maybe he was disillusioned about the potential for realizing his political program through the Colonial Council and the press and had decided that cozying up to the executive was the most effective means to see his ideas implemented. In any case, in 1906 he left *Talking Business* first to Gilbert Chiêu, then to Lê Văn Trung, a colonial councilor, entrepreneur, and eventually the first pope of the Cao Đài Religion. Lương Khắc Ninh briefly returned to the editor's chair after Gilbert Trần Chánh Chiêu's arrest in 1908, and he remained a staple of Cochinchinese public life, contributing articles to journals and giving speeches at learned societies, until a younger generation of leftist radicals disgraced him in the 1920s.

In this chapter I've argued that Lương Khắc Ninh and Canavaggio's collaboration at *Talking Business* from 1901 to 1905 marked a discrete period in the history of the Vietnamese press and set the political terms for a generation of Cochinchinese politics. I read Lương Khắc Ninh as an organic intellectual for the Orchard Heartland Gentry. Born to a reclusive scholar gentleman and traditional medicine practitioner in the Orchard Heartland core town of Bến Tre on the eve of the colonial conquest, he served eighteen years in the colonial bureaucracy before winning election by village delegates representing the heartland provinces. As a councilor, some of his positions, such as advocating salary increases for colonial clerks and campaigning for secular schools, were typical of native representatives. Others were not: his attack on the *corvée* regulations, his demand for the abolition of the *indigénat*, and his call for a secret police force to harass Chinese

and published serially. See *Nông Cổ Mĩn Đàm* 262 (23 October 1906); *Nông Cổ Mĩn Đàm* 280 (5 March 1907). The journal continued to develop the novel as a genre, serially publishing two of Cochinchina's most celebrated early novels in 1912: Lê Hoàng Mưu's *Hà Hương Phong Nguyệt* and Hồ Biểu Chánh's *Ai Lâm Được*. These are considered landmarks of the novel as a genre in Vietnam; see *Nông Cổ Mĩn Đàm*, 20 July 1912; On the history and historiography of South Vietnamese colonial era literature see John C. Schafer and Thế Uyên, "The Novel Emerges in Cochinchina," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 52, no. 4 (1993): 854–84, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2059342>; The "orphaned child" is from Bùi Đức Tịnh, *Những Bước Đầu Của Báo Chí, Truyện Ngắn, Tiểu Thuyết và Thơ Mới (1865-1932)*; Nguyễn Văn Trung, *Hồ Sơ về Lục Châu Học - Tìm Hiểu Con Người ở Vùng Đất Mới*;

³²⁹ Bùi Đức Tịnh, *Những Bước Đầu Của Báo Chí, Truyện Ngắn, Tiểu Thuyết và Thơ Mới (1865-1932)*.

³³⁰ Lê Hoàng Mưu, "Un hương nhắc lại bốn mươi năm xưa," *Thời Thế—Grand quotidiens d'informations illustré*, no. 2 (November 28, 1940). *Thời Thế—Grand quotidiens d'informations illustré*, no. 2, (28 Nov 1940)

gambling operations all testify to the surprising concerns he brought to the foundation of the first Vietnamese political paper.

With his journalism, Lương Khắc Ninh led the Cochinchinese public in two directions. In literature, he built on the nascent efforts of predecessors like Trương Vĩnh Ký and Trương Minh Ký but added to them the intensive translation of popular Chinese prose, including *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, *Strange Tales*, and Judge Bao, alongside original fiction and the colony's first public poetry competitions. During his editorship, *Talking Business* became the sole Vietnamese literary paper in print.

More important for this dissertation is that Lương Khắc Ninh, through his recurring column "Commercial Discourses," set out what I take to be the foundational political program of the Cochinchinese Vietnamese elite: the pooling of native capital into modern firms capable of displacing Chinese and Indian immigrants from the colonial economy. Drawing on his decades as a court clerk in the Mekong Delta, Lương Khắc Ninh theorized the fundamental problems he saw perpetuating Vietnamese subordination: a mix of cultural vices, institutional decay, endemic rural violence, and what he framed as parasitical immigrant capital. He prescribed the modern firm, with its transparency and clearly defined roles, as the vehicle for national revival. In what might be called Confucian-Saint Simonianism: a French utopian-socialist belief in the power of modern firms and producers' republics translated into Confucian moral terms. Lương Khắc Ninh thought the firm would restore trust among the gentry, generate employment for the landless, and rescue the nation's wealth from foreign hands.

And yet, for all the force of his rhetoric, Lương Khắc Ninh's program remained all talk. His readership applauded with odes of encouragement in regulated verse. But they did not invest. His concrete ventures don't appear to have entered operation. One problem is that the *đại thương* campaign demanded the very solidarities and institutional trust that Lương Khắc Ninh himself diagnosed as absent among the Vietnamese elite. Closing this gap required both new conditions and a new kind of figure: one with the capital, the connections, and the recklessness to force the issue. When, in 1906, Gilbert Trần Chánh Chiêu assumed control of *Talking Business* and shortly thereafter founded *Six Provinces News*, he brought an operational ambition that Lương Khắc Ninh had lacked. The next chapters turn to this transformation, tracking how the Cochinchinese Minh Tân Movement of 1907–1909 translated Lương Khắc Ninh's editorial program into an institutional mobilization, and how its violent suppression reshaped the trajectory of southern Vietnamese elite politics for a generation.

Chapter 6- Minh Tân: Gilbert Chiêu and Cochinchinese Reformism

The previous chapter showed that Lương Khắc Ninh first articulated his “big business” [*dại thương*] program in the pages of *Talking Business* between 1901 and 1905. But his appeal for anti-Chinese commercial nationalism failed to translate into action. The following two chapters trace how the Vietnamese business movement moved from editorial argument to institution building. Gilbert Chiêu carried this transition forward. He assumed the chief editorship of *Talking Business* after Lương Khắc Ninh's departure and emerged as the most prominent, and the most controversial, Vietnamese activist in turn-of-the-century Cochinchina. I argue that Gilbert Chiêu's principal contribution to Cochinchinese politics was to convert Lương Khắc Ninh's rhetoric into a concrete plan, the “Enlightened Renewal” [*Minh Tân*] movement, and to disseminate it through a second newspaper, *Six Provinces News* [*Lục Tỉnh Tân Văn*], and a standalone manifesto. Gilbert Chiêu's charisma and business connections explain some of his success, but the shift from ideas to action came about due to two local developments which scholars have overlooked: the ecological and economic devastation wrought by the floods of 1904–1905 and the French deposition of Emperor Thành Thái in 1907. A close reading of the *Minh Tân Manifesto* and the early issues of *Six Provinces News* reveals a movement preoccupied with nationalist self-strengthening against Chinese and Indian commercial competition. Even the handful of articles in *Six Provinces News* that express anti-colonial sentiment, such as the December 1907 allegory of French imperial abuse I analyze below, read on closer examination as situational responses to French interference in the succession to Thành Thái rather than as evidence of programmatic opposition to French rule. By focusing on the pro-business and anti-Chinese aspects of the Minh Tân Movement, I correct orthodox interpretations which depict the movement as an anti-colonial revolutionary conspiracy. This chapter examines the movement's ideology; the following chapter turns to the institutions that Gilbert Chiêu and his associates built to put their ideas into action.

A new chief editor at *Talking Business*

Lương Khắc Ninh edited *Talking Business* from its founding issue in August 1901 to issue 260 in October 1906. As I argued in chapter five, *Talking Business* transformed the tenor of Vietnamese journalism. Earlier papers had concentrated on practical information, such as transportation schedules, market prices, and translations of colonial decrees. Entertainment and political commentary were secondary. Lương Khắc Ninh was the first Vietnamese journalist to use print for political mobilization, and his preferred strategy was to hector his readers. He wrote of his shame at Vietnamese backwardness. His countrymen could not compete with the influx of Chinese and Indian immigrants, and he blamed Vietnamese mistrust and cowardice for their impotence. Tens of thousands of immigrants arrived penniless in Indochina and grew rich as parasites on a Vietnamese national birthright. Poor Vietnamese, in his telling, fell into crime and degrading labor while the wealthy squandered their fortunes on frivolous pursuits and neglected their duty to their compatriots.

To address this predicament, Ninh called for the establishment of Vietnamese owned firms that could push the Chinese and Indians out of Indochina. Not only would the development of competitive domestic businesses be fully in line with the traditional Confucian virtues of righteousness, duty, loyalty, and goodness, it would have the added benefit of being lucrative.

The wealthy would see their wealth increase, and the skills and wages from productive industry would lift the poor out of crime and vice. He envisioned a kind of Confucian colonial Saint-Simonianism. The parasitic institutions of ground rent and usury had, in Lương Khắc Ninh's reading, delivered the Vietnamese into colonial tutelage; he therefore placed his hopes in a landed elite that would invest its savings in productive enterprises out of a parallel sense of ethical duty and far-sighted self-interest.³³¹ In Lương Khắc Ninh's diagnosis, only a Vietnamese propensity toward risk aversion and mutual mistrust stood in their way.

Lương Khắc Ninh never reported a Vietnamese-owned firm that had risen to his program's challenge. The likeliest inference is that the gentry investors he addressed did not act on his calls. After his term in the Colonial Council ended in 1904, Diệp Văn Cương replaced him as representative of the Mỹ Tho district.³³² Lương Khắc Ninh later joined the Privy Council of the Governor of Cochinchina, a body of colonial military officers and business representatives that advised the executive on policy. The council had been an exclusively French body until it added two Vietnamese members in 1906; Lương Khắc Ninh was not among the first two, but the colonial directory lists him as a member by 1911.³³³ A 1943 French biographical dictionary states that he “was elected to the colonial council in 1902. He was then named member of the Privy Council in 1906, a role still holds today.”³³⁴ The dictionary is mistaken on the first date: the colonial council records show that Lương Khắc Ninh was elected on April 15, 1900.³³⁵ The 1943 entry presumably drew its dates from Lương Khắc Ninh's own recollection, and it appears to have been unreliable. Either way, Lương Khắc Ninh shifted from public agitation through *Talking Business* to private advisory work for the colonial executive.

A more controversial figure took the chief editorship of *Talking Business* in Lương Khắc Ninh's absence. Trần Chánh Chiếu, better known by his French name Gilbert Chiếu, was born in July 1867 — the same year as Lương Khắc Ninh and François Canavaggio, the French settler-publisher who owned *Talking Business*.³³⁶ He studied in provincial schools, and according to historian Sơn Nam, received a priest's introduction to be admitted to the missionary school *College d'Adran*. He worked first as a clerk, then briefly tried his hand at teaching, but quit after a student accused him physical abuse.³³⁷ He returned to clerical work the provincial governor's

³³¹ The relevance of Saint-Simonianism to Indochina remains largely unexplored. Work on Algerian colonization implies a potential for extension to Indochina. Osama Abi-Mershed, *Apostles of Modernity: Saint-Simonians and the Civilizing Mission in Algeria* (Stanford University Press, 2010).

³³² He is listed in the 1904 directory, but not on the 1905, *Annuaire Général de l'Indo-Chine* (F.H. Schneider, 1904).

³³³ “Politique Indigène,” *La Quinzaine Coloniale: Organe de l'Union Coloniale Française*, July 1, 1905. He appears on the 1912 directory, though his name is misspelled. *Annuaire Général de l'Indo-Chine* (F.H. Schneider, 1912), 650.

³³⁴ *Souverains et notabilités d'Indochine*, 64.

³³⁵ *Journal Officiel de l'Indochine Française* (30 April 1900) 582.

³³⁶ Biographical data from Sơn Nam, *Phong trào Duy Tân ở Bắc, Trung, Nam*, 181; Pierre Brocheux, “Note Sur Guilbert Chiếu (1867-1919), Citoyen Français et Patriote Vietnamien,” *Approche Asie*, no. 11 (n.d.): 72–81.

³³⁷ The story about beating a student, which appears in Sơn Nam, was leveled against Chiếu as part of the 1905 media campaign by “Uberle” in *France d'Asie* covered below. I've been able to partially corroborate this archivally. Uberle claims he was working at Chasseloup Laubat when he was accused, but an archival document which discusses the event provides an alternate timeline of Chiếu's life. According to it, he took up work as a *surveillant* at College d'Adran on 21 August 1884. In 1888 he was made an *instituteur* at the request of the principle, and relieved of duties as *interprète expéditionnaire* at the agricultural inspection. His personnel file from September 1888 noted he was 22 years old with two children and had been working almost 4 years with very high praise. But in 1889 he was sent to work in Châu Đốc. In 1890 he was accused, via a signed letter included in the dossier, of demanding a 5-piaster fee from the students and severely beating those unable to pay. Another teacher who shared the same

office, then left colonial clerical work to become mayor of Vĩnh Thanh Vân, in present-day Rạch Giá city. In late 1902, the colonial administration awarded Gilbert Trần Chánh Chiếu the bronze medal of merit for cultivating a thousand hectares of paddy land and dredging canals in Rạch Giá. He also purchased a set of river junks to transport paddy to market. In addition to agricultural assets, he owned fourteen downtown residential lots, all of which were zoned for construction. Bankruptcy proceedings following the 1904 typhoon record that he owned 1,337 hectares of land worked by at least 139 tenants and that he had mortgaged all his residential properties.³³⁸

Gilbert Chiếu was already a controversial public figure before he assumed the helm of *Talking Business*. A controversy erupted in the fall of 1905 when *L'Avenir du Tonkin*, a French-language newspaper based in Hanoi, published his essay "Thoughts of an Annamite" in its October 29 issue. The essay painted a dismal picture of the Vietnamese national character and offered a blunt critique of the local colonial administration.³³⁹ Gilbert Chiếu argued that the Vietnamese were hiding their animosity toward the French. The problem started, he wrote, with European functionaries who mistreated the rural elite. The indignity drove the indigenous authorities, who were stripped of honor and poorly treated, to retreat into apathy, leaving a system in which "gold trumps the law." To remedy the problem, Gilbert Chiếu advocated raising the prestige of native authorities and abolishing customs like kowtowing. As for the French, he urged them to "read the work of the upright Bao Cong of China and the incognito travels of Emperor Qianlong" to learn how to rule a conquered people. Later in this chapter I show how the colonial police misread similarly moderate criticisms of the rural administration as "calls to revolution," a claim that survives in the orthodox historiography of the Minh Tân movement.

But even this earlier critique, published in French, drew a sharp media backlash from factions of French settlers and Vietnamese elite. In late November, the Saigon French newspaper *France d'Asie* attacked Gilbert Chiếu in a series of articles that began with a letter from an anonymous

classroom wrote a letter in support of Gilbert Chiếu, saying the accusations were false and the accusers were jealous of the praise he had lavished on one of their better performing peers. Nevertheless, Gilbert Chiếu, feeling slighted by the accusation, requested to be transferred. In August of 1891 he applied for a position as personal interpreter to the exiled Hàm Nghi. A letter of recommendation for him is included in the dossier, but no response is provided. He was dismissed from a position as *instituteur* at a school in Long Xuyên on 17 May of 1893 after being AWOL since the 10th of the month. That this information was available to the anonymous writers attacking him in *France d'Asie* implies that Gilbert Chiếu had enemies within the administration even before the start of the Minh Tân movement. See: 12708 "Dossier individuel de M. Huynh Ngoc Chieu, Pham Ngoc Chieu, Tran Chanh Chieu, Tran Van Chieu, Bui Quang Chieu" *TDNK TTLTQG2*

³³⁸ Brocheux, "Note Sur Guilbert Chiêu (1867-1919), Citoyen Français et Patriote Vietnamien."

³³⁹ Gilbert Chieu, "Pensée d'une Annamite" *L'Avenir du Tonkin*, 3195 (Hanoi: 29 Oct. 1905). Regarding Vietnamese "nhaquê" "The Annamite is a being apart. From the way he is constituted, it is very easy for him to conceal deep within his heart the most extraordinary emotions of life. He is consequently rather impenetrable than apathetic. More fatalistic than the Arab, he lets fate run its course without reacting. Alea jacta est, he says, even if the thing happened to his detriment through his own fault. Weak in character, he never has an opinion of his own. Fear easily atrophies his faculties. Very sensitive to good treatment, he becomes rebellious and vindictive to bad treatment. He opposes tyranny with the most complete inertia. Indifferent to everything, he fundamentally has no other religions than the cult of his ancestors. Buddhism and Christianity are for him rather distractions than serious dogmas. Carefree in the extreme, he only likes immediate interest and easy gain. Which makes him a relentless amateur of games of chance. Very mocking and expansive in his hamlet, he becomes distrustful at the approach of a stranger. But he is, on the other hand, very sociable, and devoted even to the point of sacrifices with this stranger if the latter speaks his language and understands his soul. You can do whatever you want with him, when you know how to handle him."

"group of highly elite Annamites".³⁴⁰ His critics accused Gilbert Chiếu of being a half-Chinese *Minh-Huong*, which they said explained his "special mentality" and his disdain for pure-blooded Annamites. They accused him of denigrating the Vietnamese to secure an honorary title and suggested that he belonged in a mental asylum. Columnists writing under the names Max Agier and Hurle Uberlu kept up the personal attacks. Uberlu published an account of Gilbert Chiếu's life and career which claimed he had been "cordially hated" by his students, then dismissed from a teaching post at Long Xuyên. Uberlu alleged that Gilbert Chiếu had built his wealth by tutoring the Rạch Giá provincial administrator's child and used the relationship to secure positions as regional secretary, mayor of Vĩnh Thanh Vân, and district councilor before becoming a landowner.

Whatever sympathy with the rural Vietnamese his 1905 essay may suggest, his political alignment at this stage rested firmly with the colonial elite. Only weeks after the controversy, he joined a petition signed by the most powerful French settlers and naturalized Vietnamese of the colony to confirm the legal supremacy of French citizens over Vietnamese subjects.³⁴¹ Furthermore, Gilbert Chiếu's writings were published in *L'Avenir du Tonkin*, which represented right-wing settler interests against a corrupt colonial bureaucracy run by freemasons (see figure 1 below). Publishing one or two essays in *L'Avenir du Tonkin* does not necessarily mean Gilbert Chiếu completely endorsed its right-wing settler line, nevertheless the fact that *L'Avenir du Tonkin* was willing to publish his critiques in a dispute with *France d'Asie* sheds light on the ideological factions which crosscut both French and Vietnamese populations. These public exchanges, the disputes over his reputation, his critiques of the colonial administration, and his calls to raise the standing of indigenous authorities, form the immediate background to his assumption of the chief editorship at *Talking Business* in 1906.³⁴²

³⁴⁰The attacks on Chiếu appear in Hurle Uberlu, "Les idées de M. Gilbert Chieu" *France d'Asie* (Saigon: 16 Nov 1905) 2; "Gilbert Chieu" *France d'Asie* (Saigon: 21 Nov 1905) 2; "Gilbert Chieu" *France d'Asie* (Saigon: 28 Nov 1905) 2.

³⁴¹A faction led by Jean Lê-Phát-Thanh, of the Lê Phát clan, launched a formalized tax protest. Because the 1889 decree organizing provincial councils excluded French citizens from participating, naturalized Vietnamese found themselves paying regional land taxes levied by indigenous councils upon which they had no representation. Framing their protest around the principle of no taxation without representation, this group of wealthy French colons and naturalized Vietnamese, including Gilbert Chiếu, formally demanded the right for French citizens to be represented on the provincial councils. Moreover, the whole motion is framed as an unjust tax on Frenchmen by natives who, it is implied, should only be taxed, rather than tax others. See: "Les Français taxés par les indigènes" *L'Avenir du Tonkin* 3437 (Hanoi: 19 December 1906) 2.

³⁴²A year before the tax petition, Chiếu applied and was rejected from the French Planters Union. He appealed the rejection the basis of being a naturalized French citizen, and his motion unanimously adopted. Paris, then union and colonial council president, took the occasion to make a speech, "This decision honors both the French planters and the indigenous planters. It superabundantly proves that the former have an exact understanding of the true interests of Agriculture in Cochinchina, and by associating honest and hardworking natives with their efforts, they have committed an act of high politics with a considerable scope from various points of view. We hope that our Colonists of Annam and Tonkin will enter the same path, and these procedures, by attracting to them the loyal and healthy part of the indigenous population, will gradually allow, in mutual confidence, to bring everyone—all equally interested in the progress of the country—onto the safest common ground, that of the economic and agricultural interests of our region." See the column, "Chronique Locale" *L'Avenir du Tonkin* (Hanoi: 16 April 1905) 2.



Figure 6. Comic on the front page of *L'Avenir du Tonkin* 19 Dec 1906. “Our New Year’s Present to the Peasants” -- A colon and a Vietnamese peasant strain beneath the weight of the colonial monopolies and taxes, which it alleges fund kickbacks to 33rd Degree freemasons.

Talking Business had grown substantially by the start of Gilbert Chiếu’s tenure. Though it began in 1901 as Ninh’s personal project, by 1906 it had developed into a mature journalistic enterprise which counted many of the era’s most important intellectuals among its staff writers. Take for example the August 1, 1907 issue which besides the familiar faces of François Canavaggio as owner and Gilbert Chiếu as chief editor, listed thirteen other writers and editors, most of whom hailed from the Orchard Gentry elite.³⁴³ For example, bureau chief [chủ sự] Nguyễn Đồng Trụ was born in Tân Hưng village, Sa Đéc Province and studied at the College de Mytho. At the age of 23, he started at the large import-export firm Allatini, where he worked for more than two decades. He was also an organizer at the Paris Colonial Expo in 1889, and an honorary district chief.³⁴⁴ Lê Tịnh, who wrote articles on historical customs [*thói xưa*], is listed as a Tú Tài 秀才 and an imperial licentiate. Huỳnh Thúc Mậu, who covered industry, was a *quốc ngữ* translator and early commentator on *The Tale of Kieu* from Lập Vò, Sa Đéc. Trần Phong Sắc, an elementary school teacher from Tân An owed his fame to his serial translation of the Chinese

³⁴³ Unfortunately, most of the issues of this period appear to have been lost, but scattered citations and collections of extended citations have been made across a handful of Vietnamese researchers in Saigon during the 1960s and 70s. The list of contributors is drawn from Phạm Long Điền “Cúp tóc trong Phong trào Duy tân tại Miền Nam”, *Bach Khoa* 424 p47

³⁴⁴ Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Điếu Cổ Hạ Kim Thi Tập*, 238.

epic, *Investiture of the Gods* [*phong thần diễn nghĩa* 封神演義] in 1906. Nguyễn Liên Phong, a central-region transplant to Bến Tre whose gazetteers and biographical dictionaries I analyzed in the previous two chapters, wrote articles on “investment.” Trịnh Hoài Nghĩa covered agriculture for the newspaper. He taught at Chasseloup-Laubat and was a descendant of the nineteenth-century geographer and historian Trịnh Hoài Đức. Tống Hữu Định, a regular writer on ‘civilization,’ was a Vĩnh Long notable who helped renovate the Temple of Literature and contributed to the birth of *cải lương*, reformed Southern theatrical opera that emerged in the 1910s.³⁴⁵ Though not listed on the masthead, Đặng Thúc Liêng contributed frequently to the newspaper. He was a poet, translator, and political figure who remained a fixture of Cochinchinese political life until his death in 1944.

By 1907 *Talking Business* boasted a controversial new chief editor and a roster drawn from the Orchard Heartland gentry of the Mekong Delta. But the energy that produced the Minh Tân movement was not imported from southern China; Gilbert Chiêu inherited Lương Khắc Ninh's anti-Chinese commercial program and its readership, and he translated that program into action. What enabled the translation was a change in the conditions under which the gentry read *Talking Business*, and to those conditions I now turn.

New external conditions

Gilbert Chiêu shifted *Talking Business* from editorial advocacy to organized political campaigning. Before turning to his program, I consider two local changes that opened conditions for political activism among the gentry.

Most historians explain the growth of political activism among the Cochinchinese gentry in these years by reference to Japan's victory over Russia at Tsushima in 1905, the example it set for Asian reformers, and Phan Bội Châu's 1905–06 trips to Japan, which are said to have stirred the colony. As detailed in chapter one, conventional histories depict Gilbert Chiêu as a domestic agent within a largely overseas network of Vietnamese literati revolutionaries inspired by Chinese and Japanese reformers. I do not deny the East Asian context shaped what the southern gentry did. Gilbert Chiêu's political activism intensified after his tour of southern China. He returned impressed by the Chinese provincial gentry he had met and went on to help organize the illegal travel of Vietnamese students to Japan. Phan Bội Châu chose to champion the royal pretender Cường Để in part to attract Cochinchinese money: the southern gentry remained loyal to the Nguyễn line, and a Nguyễn pretender was the figure most likely to mobilize their support. I argue that these East Asian connections, while real for the student movement, have been unduly extended to explain the broader Cochinchinese business movement.

Two local factors, both overlooked in the literature, catalyzed the activism of the Orchard Heartland gentry. The first was the devastation that struck the Mekong Delta in 1904–1906. An unseasonably early typhoon opened the 1904 rainy season, followed by a major flood and a second typhoon later that year. The following year brought drought, then a locust infestation so severe that the Governor of Cochinchina's annual report described it as “unknown until this day.”³⁴⁶ These disasters fell hardest on the western provinces, which depended on rice monoculture and were vulnerable to harvest failure. As the same report acknowledged, “misery

³⁴⁵ Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Điều Cổ Hạ Kim Thi Tập*, 245.

³⁴⁶ “Rapports du Lieutenant-Gouverneur de la Cochinchine au Gouverneur général de l'Indochine sur la situation politique et économique de la Cochinchine de l'année 1906, années 1906-1909.” 24109 TDNK TTLTQG2

has struck the peasant accustomed to regular and easy harvests and has led to a state of profound malaise in the entire population." The colonial administration granted tax relief of some 300,000 piasters across the western provinces, representing more than fourteen percent of the total land tax in some districts, while securing an additional 700,000 piasters in emergency harvest loans through the Bank of Indochina. Despite these measures, the administration conceded that the cultivators remained "quite heavily encumbered." This disaster most forcefully struck the middling gentry who formed the core constituency of *Talking Business*. As I noted above, the 1904 floods bankrupted Gilbert Chiếu. And he was hardly alone. The report noted that landowners throughout the west, "hypnotized by the lure of easy gains," had overextended into new lands on borrowed capital and held no reserves against the disaster.

The political consequences of this shock were twofold. First, the disasters exposed the vulnerability of a gentry whose landed wealth depended on the monsoon. The disasters added urgency to calls for economic diversification through new commercial and industrial enterprises, the program Lương Khắc Ninh had been advocating to little effect for years. Second, the disaster generated the colony's first significant experience with inter-provincial civic coordination. Though the scale of these initiatives is hard to measure, gentry philanthropic responses to the floods created organizational precedents and networks of trust that the Minh Tân movement would later mobilize for different ends. *Talking Business* covered the floods closely. Lương Khắc Ninh pointed out that, had readers heeded his call for "big business," they would not be in such dire straits.³⁴⁷ The newspaper, as well as Nguyễn Liên Phong's previously discussed gazetteers and biographical dictionaries, praised the local elites who organized disaster relief.³⁴⁸

The environmental shock coincided with a political event that struck at the ideological foundations of the accommodationist elite. In September 1907, the French deposed Emperor Thành Thái on the pretext of mental instability and replaced him with his young son Duy Tân, a child pliable enough to pose no threat.³⁴⁹ As I argued in chapter four, the southern gentry assigned Thành Thái a unique place in their political loyalties. On his 1897 tour of Cochinchina, Thành Thái visited the ancestral tombs in Gò Công and lent legitimacy to the modes of Franco-Vietnamese cooperation that the colonial elite had developed. By paying homage to his Mekong forebears, he reunited a Delta gentry hitherto riven by lingering civil strife. For this class, Thành Thái's dethronement struck a severe blow at the tacit bargain that had let them combine cooperation with France with loyalty to the Nguyễn court at Huế. The earliest issues of *Six Provinces News* record that the gentry felt the blow: Gilbert Chiếu published poems attacking Vietnamese who supported the deposition, then later ran the allegory "Stepfather and Stepchildren," which I analyze at length below. The deposition unsettled the accommodationist

³⁴⁷ Lương Dù Thúc, "Thương cô luận" *NMCD* 140 (12 May 1904), 1.

³⁴⁸ To name a few: Nguyễn Xuân Phong "Cảm ân chư vị cai phó tổng và hương chức chư thôn Trà-vinh Cần-thơ Sóc-trăng Bắc-liêu" and Chủ bút "Hạ tân vinh" *NMCD* 140 (12 May 1904), 2.; Khuru-anh "Liệt phong phú" *NMCD* 143 (2 June 1904), 5; "Bảo lự" *NMCD* 144 (9 June 1904) 3; "Thi phở" *NMCD* 145 (16 June 1904) 2. In Nguyễn Liên Phong, see Huỳnh Quang Vị, who is the target of praise in many of the poems featured in the above passages of *Talking Business*, raised 3,000 piasters in disaster relief. For which he was awarded the rank of Honorary Đốc phủ sứ. Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Diếu Cổ Hạ Kim Thi Tập*, 173. Vị was one of the wealthiest Vietnamese in the colony, but many less famous individuals also got involved. For example, a descendent of the Hứ clan, according to Nguyễn Liên Phong one of the regions "wealthy clans of yore" [*lớp xưa giàu lớn có danh*] who is still loved by the common people in the area [*dấu roi thiên hạ chuộng yêu*], raised and distributed 3,000 piasters worth of rice. Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Nam kỳ Phong tục Nhơn vật Diển ca Chú thích*, 369–70.

³⁴⁹ Vũ Ngự Chiêu, *Các vua cuối nhà Nguyễn, 1883-1945* (Văn Hóa, 1999).

arrangement and opened a space for the gentry to organize on their own terms. Gilbert Chiếu drafted the Minh Tân Manifest at a moment when the floods had already exposed economic model and French usurpation of Thành Thái had undermined elite faith in colonial stewardship.

The Minh Tân Campaign

Gilbert Chiếu launched the movement in *Talking Business* in 1907. Unfortunately, the 1904–1910 issues of the newspaper appear to have been lost; what I know of *Talking Business* in this period comes from fragments preserved in secondary scholarship written while the sources were still extant. The most detailed of these is a pair of essays by the literary historian Phạm Long Điền, published in 1974 in the Saigon literary newspaper *Bách Khoa*, and a standalone manifesto collecting articles from *Talking Business*, likely published in late 1907.³⁵⁰

Gilbert Chiếu had travelled to Hong Kong in July of that year, met Phan Bội Châu, and toured the provinces of southern China. *Talking Business* had been hammering on Vietnamese backwardness relative to the Chinese for years before this trip, and Gilbert Chiếu went to see Chinese reform first-hand.³⁵¹ He returned with a plan for economic and cultural development and threw himself frantically into the movement. Novelist and journalist Lê Hoàng Mưu's memoir depicts Gilbert Chiếu as a man constantly on the move and holding court:

³⁵⁰ These essays argue for the preeminence of the Southern reform movement. One interesting aspect which I've been unable to weave into the body of the dissertation reconstructs a months-long debate over haircutting as a symbol of modernization that ran in *Talking Business* from late 1906, well before the better-known Hanoi versions of these debates that historians attribute to the Tonkin Free School [*Đông Kinh Nghĩa Thục*] founded in the summer of 1907. Phạm Long Điền's reconstruction shows that *Talking Business* anticipated the nationwide reformist debates in both cultural and economic terms, supporting my argument from the previous chapter that the movement originated in Cochinchina. In the south the debate ran across multiple issues of *Talking Business*. Đặng Thúc Liêng defended the (mostly younger) haircut enthusiasts and tied the issue to the 1904 flood and to Vietnamese backwardness relative to the Chinese. Gilbert Chiếu feared that profits from the new market in scissors and hats would go to Chinese immigrants, and urged his countrymen stop encouraging haircuts until Vietnamese could invest position themselves to profit from the new business. The debate begins from NCMD 271 (25 Dec 1906) to NCMD 275 (22 Jan 1907) cited in Phạm Long Điền, "Cúp tóc trong Phong trào Duy tân tại Miền Nam," *Bách Khoa* 424, (1975) 47. For the founding of the Tonkin Free School see Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism 1885-1925*, 164. Marr claims March 1907, but Nguyễn Hiến Lê, who Marr cites, actually has May 1907 Nguyễn Hiến Lê, *Đông Kinh Nghĩa Thục* (Lá Bối, 1968), 49. The whole history of the related "Haircut Chant" is fairly dubious. Marr claims the chant spread after a Phan Châu Trinh speech that was supposedly given at the Free School and which implied, through wordplay, that haircutting was part of ridding Vietnamese of French colonial parasites. This has the rhetorical function of lending an anticolonial tinge to a chant which is otherwise blatantly pro-western in orientation. Marr draws this account almost exclusively from Lê's chapter on "Speeches" (p75-83), which is an unsourced collection of quoted speeches alleged to have been given to large crowds at the founding of and during the early months of the school. According to this account, after Phan's speech, "for six months everywhere one went in Hanoi one would hear" the song, and "then in Hà Tĩnh, a twenty year old youth went to each market day, holding his scissors, and to anyone he met with the topknot he would beg them "I beg you sir to let me cut this conservative bun from your head"(Lê, 83). Marr acknowledges that "no source is given; we assume the above is not a literal quotation, but rather a recollection by one of the Dong Kinh Nghia Thuc participants interviewed by the author" (p170 footnote 41). Yet the author in question, Nguyễn Hiến Lê, doesn't make that claim. Despite the dubious provenance of this information, Marr nonetheless uses it to claim that "It was after this speech that the anonymous 'haircutting chant' began to circulate in Hanoi, eventually sweeping through most of the provinces, to become perhaps the most famous message of the Dong Kinh Nghia Thuc movement"

³⁵¹ He wrote a reportage of the ongoing process of reforms there entitled *Hương Cảng Nhơn Vật*, which unfortunately appears to have been lost.

He spent mornings in Saigon and evenings in Mỹ Tho. Too busy to host guests, he would meet them while reclining to smoke [opium] and receive injections from young women who massaged his back like a martial arts master. His guests stood at his feet, waiting for a chance to deliver whatever question they came to ask.³⁵²

The movement began in *the pages of Talking Business*, although these issues have been lost, Gilbert Chiêu collected his lead articles into a pamphlet that the Saigon publisher Đinh Thái Sơn's house Phát Toán printed sometime before 1908.³⁵³

Manifesto of the Minh Tân Movement

The 16-page *Short Discourse on Enlightenment and Renewal* [*Minh Tân Tiểu Thuyết*], hereafter the Minh Tân Manifesto, has five sections: a “Preface” [*Tựa*] signed Trần Chánh Chiêu tự Nhựt Quang, an article entitled “Discourse on Canon” [*Tịch Thư Gia Luận*] signed Trước Nguyên X-X, “Practical Commerce” [*Cách buôn bán*] signed Nguyễn Văn Lành, “Commercial Defeat” [*Thương trường bại tích*] signed by the playwright Tân Dân Tử, and “Reform Company” [*Duy Tân Công Ty*] Gilbert Chiêu’s proposal for a new investment scheme. Because Gilbert Chiêu chose these articles for a standalone pamphlet, they offer the clearest record of what *Talking Business* stood for between his return from southern China in July 1907 and his founding of a second newspaper, *Six Provinces News*, in November 1907.

Gilbert Chiêu's preface echoes the motivations Lương Khắc Ninh had given six years earlier. “I don’t do this for my own gain, I’m exhausting myself to find a way to defend our country, to renew it, so that we escape the clutches of the Chinese and Indians who are competing for our profits and encroaching upon our livelihoods.” He complained that “foreigners mock us as barbarians” and lamented how Vietnamese were forced to “scurry around, scrambling like wandering ghosts, buying everything from foreigners, all our efforts going to the Chinese, Oh! I can’t express it all. Thinking about it brings tears to my eyes.” He explained that he had assembled the manifesto from various editorials to inaugurate the “Minh Tân Company,” which would encourage virtue and discourage vice. He compared his message to “a fresh Ca-na fruit... [...] Bitter at first, but sweet as time passes.”

Although the preface presents Minh Tân as an intensification of the nativist commercial nationalism *Talking Business* had already pursued since 1901, the first and longest article in the pamphlet is not about business at all. Rather, it addressed two concerns of the movement left out of the orthodox historiography: heritage and religion. “Discourse on Canon” attacks the foreign religions that, in the manifesto's view, had polluted Vietnamese culture and held it back. The manifesto is hostile to superstition. The manifesto opens with the problem of “Sorcerers,” “Buddhas of the Western Peace,” and “Priestesses of divination,” which it treats as a waste of hope and money, echoing the critique Nguyễn Liên Phong made in his gazetteers.

³⁵² Lê Hoàng Mưu- Un hương nhắc lại bốn mươi năm xưa, *Thời Thế-Grand quotidiens d’informations illustré*, no.4, 30 Nov 1940

³⁵³ Phạm Long Điền “Vai trò Nông cổ Mìn đàm trong Phong Trào Duy-tân ở miền Nam,” *Bách Khoa* 425 (1975) 23 notes that “Duy Tân Công Ty” was published in *NCMD* 303 (13 July 1907). That Gilbert Chiêu referred to the Minh Tân company instead of the Duy Tân Company in the preface means that it was written and the manifesto assembled after Duy Tân ascended the throne in September. A photocopy of the manifesto is available at <https://archive.org/details/MinhTanTieuThuyet/02.JPG>. Note that the pages are out of order. *Minh Tân Tiểu Thuyết* (Phát Toán: 1908?),

Buddhist monks and spirit mediums are like opera performers. They don't need elaborate costumes or props yet take in immense sums of money while receiving reverence and prostrations. Why, one wonders, do people so readily accept this? If only these priests could be genuinely useful, for example, if someone is in debt to a Chetty [Indian money lender], they could invite a monk to chant prayers to disappear the debt papers, or hire a shaman to summon genies to steal those papers, or call upon a spirit medium to summon Lady Water or Lady Fire to speak to the moneylender and have the debt canceled. They would avoid endless lawsuits and proceedings. How beneficial would that be! One would be happy no matter how much bowing and worshipping it took! But these things we imagine don't exist—they truly don't exist, surely figments of the mind. So why waste one's wealth on such practices? There is a saying: "Respect the ghosts and spirits but keep your distance—this is wisdom." Respecting them without believing in them, and keeping them at arm's length, is what it means to be truly wise.

The author treats Confucianism as more beneficial than the other religions, but it too has problems. The "Annamese," he writes, "have long copied from inherited Chinese books." He praises Confucianism for grounding ethics in the home and reinforcing national virtue through immediate kin, rather than relying on the good will of wandering swindlers as the priests and shamans do. Nevertheless, Confucianism too has given way to "frivolity" which has "added to the decay of public virtue" by,

superficial and haphazard study, learning medicine in a sloppy manner, practicing geomancy with absurd claims, and dabbling in reckless and opportunistic divination. Such actions harm society, and rather than being of any benefit to the world, they are entirely without value.

The author argues that the Vietnamese should instead emulate the French, who study a formal curriculum. French medicine separates pharmacist from doctor, the manifesto observes, preventing the Confucian tendency to lump together such disparate fields as fengshui, astrology, and medicine under a quackery of general expertise. Foreign superstitions, the author continues, attach themselves to Confucianism because Vietnamese education has been allowed to degenerate. For proof, one need only look to Europe, "which pays no heed to demons and geomancy, but has surpassed us." He concludes:

Have our people followed Chinese customs for so long that this has become a habit we can't break - even as the Chinese, long enchanted by such superstitions, have awakened, startled to see their country under the spell of these illusions. They have since decided to reduce such superstitions and today they are close to being eliminated. We Annamese ought to copy them and not waste time every day with useless frivolities that weaken us and prevent us from developing intellectually and catching up to the world.

Trước Nguyễn's article lays out the Minh Tân Movement's diagnosis of the educational and religious problems facing the Vietnamese. As I argued in chapter four, the gentry was hostile to peasant millenarianism, which complicates the colonial police's classification of the movement as a "secret society." But the article also explores the double bind facing the Vietnamese. Subordinated by both French colonialism and Chinese commercial dominance, they had an unsettled relationship to China and the Chinese. On the one hand, Chinese immigrants dominated local markets and blocked Vietnamese capital accumulation and local investment. Movement

leaders believed that the immigrants compounded Vietnamese backwardness by importing superstitions that siphoned off the meager disposable income of a race already in existential crisis. The French, meanwhile, offered no concrete program to the Cochinchinese gentry. Chinese reform, by contrast, gave them an actionable model. The Minh Tân writers expressed no animus toward the Chinese in China; they wrote of them with admiration.

The second and third articles in the manifesto take up business. Nguyễn Văn Lành's "Practical Commerce" advises readers to stay abreast of prices, keep their licensing current, and treat their work and their clients with respect. Do not defraud your clients and don't spend money on "gambling and whores" [cờ bạc đào đĩ], he added. Doing so "doesn't only disgrace your patriline, it besmirches the reputation of all the children of Annam. Foreigners already call us thieves and swindlers. [...] France didn't build its courts and prisons to hold livestock, but to lock up fraudsters who steal other's property."

Where "Practical Commerce" invokes national humiliation to argue for reformed business culture, Tân Dân Tử's "Commercial Defeat" casts the commercial struggle as a racial and existential fight.

Look up and see. Chợ Lớn, our nation's land, now nothing but a Cantonese province dumped on us from China. They scurry around like ants in a broken hive, overflowing like a broken dike. Every industry has been totally absorbed by the Qing Men, while the natives huddle around burnt out grassy fields. Rare is a man daring enough to show his face in the markets -- the promised lands [ba đại địa], the commercial battlefields -- to engage in big business. Instead, the Chinese and Indians, vagabonds sheltering in our country, have taken all our profits and sit enthroned before us, stealing our commerce and growing wealthier and happier than we.

According to "Practical Commerce," Chinese and Indian domination of the economy extended beyond Chợ Lớn to "all 21 provinces" and "on every road and stream all the way up the Tiền and Hậu Rivers." Since the French and Chinese controlled the transportation industry, "we natives have been utterly defeated up and down every river and stream spanning from the South to the North; the foreigners have even taken more than half of the major fisheries". It continued:

If one day the Chinese and Indians spill over *en masse* into our country, and steal all the fields and orchards left us by our forefathers, would we natives even be able to stop them? Would we not simply lose again? [...] Once defeated, then the most fertile lands of our country will yield to Chinese plows, our family inheritance will fall in the hands of Indians, and what then will be the fate of the millions of our countrymen? What will be the path to development for these millions of souls? What will be the fate of our countrymen, if not to be born into dependency, if not to serve as their slaves.

Meanwhile, instead of trying to save the sinking ship, the passengers slept, burned joss paper, or indulged in prostitution, gambling, and opium. Here, Tân Dân Tử pauses to pitch Gilbert Chiếu's business plan:

Should not the passengers instead recognize the dangerous process underway, combine their energies as of one heart, and grab hold of the oars, steer the wheel, start the motor, hoist the sails, no matter how hard the work, withstanding even a thousand hardships to glide over waves, through storms and paddle the ship to shore. [...] Now Trần Chánh

Chiếu, the chief editor of *Talking Business*, has begun such a vital enterprise for our countrymen. So we should combine energies as of one heart and establish the Reform and Progress company, each person investing a little because collective contribution can transform a stream into an ocean, with our wills combined we can succeed [*thí quần năng lưu biển hải, chung chí khả thành thành*], or in the words of the French: *L'union fait la force*.

Tân Dân Từ's plea sets up Gilbert Chiếu's proposal for the Reform Company [*Duy Tân Công Ty*]. Gilbert Chiếu treated the campaign as a corrective to what he saw as Confucianism's historical impotence.

Reforming the people has been a principal of the sages since the man himself was still living: 'the way of great learning is to clarify illustrious virtue, to renew the people'. Nevertheless, since Shi Xie civilized the people South of Yue, a review of our Confucian scholars shows little else than implicit and explicit backwardness, without even a shred of renewal!³⁵⁴

Gilbert Chiếu explains that he had travelled to Hong Kong, Yangcheng (Guangzhou), Hunan, Hubei, Foshan, and Sanshui to research reform first-hand. He saw industry on every corner, "manufacturing all sorts of things to send over to Viet Nam and sell to our people." Everywhere people established printshops and newspapers featuring easy-to-understand illustrations for the masses. Lettered men were busy translating foreign books for the people to enjoy. The poor worked as paperboys, the old hawked medicine, and "the big businessmen [*các nhà đại thương*] published advertisements and stories, pasting them all over walls in the cities: walls once moldy were now covered in colorful posters". One example, which Gilbert Chiếu said made him "shed tears of embarrassment," concerned the share offerings for the Hankou–Guangzhou and Shantou–Chaozhou railways. When he asked local Chinese about the reform, they answered:

"Look at the Hangkou railway, each share is only 5\$ [sic]. And yet, it's been less than a month and the Qing have raised more than 8 thousand ten thousands: 80000000\$ [sic], the Swatow railway is likewise a large investment." Oh! If only you Councilors, you Canton Chiefs and Village notables had the desire, there would be nothing you couldn't do! And this is what it would mean for you to 'clarify illustrious virtue'. The work of renewing the people is your role, it is your duty, if you men do not bring it into being, it doesn't matter how talented you are, you will be totally impotent. This is the truth! [...] I propose to establish an enterprise for Renewing the People [*tác tân dân*], starting with 20,000 shares, each share at only 5\$, it isn't much! Surely each province could account for 1,000 shares! Whether or not we succeed is in your hands, sirs! If we do succeed, then $20,000 \times 5 = 10$ ten thousand silver piasters which will be used to found a technical school that would sponsor instructors from abroad to come teach our youths.³⁵⁵

Here the Minh Tân Manifesto pitches the same investment scheme Lương Khắc Ninh had pitched without success. But Gilbert Chiếu, unlike Lương Khắc Ninh, moved beyond editorial

³⁵⁴ A reference to the opening of *daxue*.

³⁵⁵ Ironically it was precisely the Qing refusal to honor the shareholder rights in the Hangkou Sichuan Railway that triggered the 1911 revolution, as disgruntled provincial gentry shareholders raised militias and the military defected. See Joseph Esherick, *Reform and Revolution in China: The 1911 Revolution in Hunan and Hubei* (Center for Chinese studies, University of Michigan, 1998).

appeals to actual organizing. He based his program on the Chinese reformers' program, and divided it into three categories:

1. Proliferating primary schools so that all people, young and old, may receive education.
2. Proliferating industrial and technological institutions so that the nation's development thrives, and no citizen is left without the ability to secure their own rights and interests.
3. Proliferating military academies... [ellipses in original] ³⁵⁶

The ellipsis ending the third item is suggestive: it seems to acknowledge in print from the outset that the Phan Bội Châu–Cường Đê “Going East” movement was one military prong of Gilbert Chiếu's program. Historians have made this military prong the chief focus of their accounts of Minh Tân, but it was one of three. The other two prongs, popular education and industrial-technical development, made up the bulk of the movement's agenda and remained central to Mekong elite politics long after Gilbert Chiếu's 1908 arrest.

The Minh Tân Manifesto, taken as a whole, makes three claims: that Vietnamese economic subjugation by Chinese and Indian immigrants is the central national problem, that Vietnamese moral and cultural failings (superstition, mutual distrust, frivolous spending) are the enabling conditions, and that capital concentration through joint-stock enterprise, popular education, and selective adoption of Chinese reform models are the remedies. Military insurrection, the strand colonial police and later historiography have made central to the Minh Tân story, is only obliquely hinted at in the manifesto as the third item of a three-part program. The manifesto's center of gravity lies elsewhere, in the bourgeois self-strengthening project that Lương Khắc Ninh had been advocating since 1901 and that Gilbert Chiếu, on returning from southern China in 1907, gave a name and an organizational form.

A Second Newspaper- Six Provinces News and the problematization of the moment

Around the time he published the *Minh Tân Manifesto*, Gilbert Chiếu teamed up with a frequent contributor to *Talking Business*, Nguyễn An Khương, to start a second newspaper, *Six Provinces News* [*Lục Tỉnh Tân Văn* cited as LTTV]. The new newspaper may have grown out of editorial tensions at *Talking Business*, since attacks on Gilbert Chiếu later began when Lê Văn Trung — a Cochinchinese businessman, colonial councilor, and future founding Pope of the Cao Đài religion — took over *Talking Business* in May 1908.³⁵⁷ But the May 1908 split is an unlikely cause for a November 1907 founding. In autumn 1907 Gilbert Chiếu stood at the height of his prestige, enjoying close relations with colons, the colonial administration, and the senior Vietnamese collaborator elite.

In November 1907, Gilbert Chiếu and Nguyễn An Khương founded *Six Provinces News* under the ownership of Pierre Jeantet, a French journalist who owned the French-language newspaper *Le Petit Saigonais* and served as political director for François Canavaggio's French newspaper *Le Colon*. Nguyễn An Khương was a Chinese-to-quốc-ngữ translator and father to the future

³⁵⁶ “1. Đa khai tiểu học đường, Sữ nhơn nhơn cu thọ giáo dục. 2. Đa khai Công nghệ cuộc, sữ thông quốc vô du dân tự thủ lợi quyền. 3. Đa khai thủy lục quân học đường...” *Minh Tân Tiểu Thuyết* (Phát Toàn: 1908?), 15.

³⁵⁷ See chapter nine of this dissertation for a full account.

leftist radical Nguyễn An Ninh. Gilbert Chiêu served as chief editor, initially under the alias Trần Nhựt Thăng, meaning “Trần Rising Sun,” which I read as a nod to his admiration for Japan.

Six Provinces News served as the principal vehicle for implementing the reform program laid out in the Minh Tân Manifesto. Its base of operations was the South Central Hotel in Saigon, with all submissions to be addressed to Nguyễn An Khương at the hotel, and advertisements for the hotel appearing throughout the paper, even on the masthead.³⁵⁸ The paper also appears to have been conceived as a vehicle for attracting investment to a new printshop for movement material. “We believe books and newspapers are the two indispensable means to develop the masses [*mở mang thiên hạ*],” the editors wrote. “We the Printing Company are offering shares so you civilized gentlemen can tend to the rapid progress of our Southern homeland.”³⁵⁹ The printing company would operate from *Six Provinces News*’ headquarters, next door to the South Central Hotel. Although *Six Provinces News* went on to become the longest-running quốc ngữ newspaper of the colonial era (1907–1944) and to earn a reputation for tameness against the more combative interwar press, but it began as the central organ of an incipient Minh Tân party.

Six Provinces News shared content and contributors with *Talking Business*. These included figures like Trước Nguyễn X-X, who composed the longest essay in the Minh Tân Manifesto, or Nguyễn Minh Triết, another longtime contributor to *Talking Business*. Occasionally, letters praising *Talking Business* appeared in *Six Provinces News*, further blurring the relationship between the two publications.

The earliest issues of *Six Provinces News* consisted almost entirely of propaganda for the Minh Tân movement, celebrating gentry members and condemning the figures and customs the movement deemed backward. However, the newspaper also represented conflicting perspectives and hosted lively debates. The still extant December 1907 installments are a case in point. The newspaper released four issues (numbers 4–7) between December 5 and December 26. The paper was growing in circulation and tried out some of its most strident material during this period, including the few articles that police and later scholars have read as “anticolonial.” However, although all the articles featured a nationalist call for modernization and reform, they represented a variety of viewpoints, authors and genres.

Each issue consisted of 18 pages, counting the back and front cover. Setting aside paid advertisements in the front and back matter, and the South Central Hotel share advertisements that ran in every issue, the four December issues carried 55 original articles. The articles can be categorized into 12 types: editorials on administrative issues, editorials on business strengthening, editorials on education, fiction, editorials on backwards Vietnamese habits and attitudes, articles transmitting historical or geographical information, jokes and humorous stories, editorials on physical fitness, praise for individuals or institutions, public offerings of stocks in various companies, a debate over Vietnamese religion, and short pieces of reportage. Although topics often blended, a rough tabulation shows the religion debate dominating the month’s content, more than a quarter of all articles. It was a prominent feature of the Minh Tân movement that the existing scholarship has overlooked.

Article type	Count
Editorials	19

³⁵⁸ *LTTV* 4 (5 Dec 1907). The hotel was a central institution for the movement, detailed in Chapter 7.

³⁵⁹ “Công-ty Nhà in: phóng hùn,” *LTTV* 4 (5 Dec 1907), 1.

Administrative reform	2
Business reform	6
Education reform	4
Habit reform	6
Physical fitness	1
Religion debate	15
Reporting	13
History and geography	2
Praise	8
Reportage	3
Stories	6
Fiction	3
Humor	3
Public offering	2
Grand Total	55

Bad Habits

Movement writers mirrored Lương Khắc Ninh's earlier diagnoses and blamed Vietnamese backwardness on moral failings like greed, short-sightedness, and bad manners. The diagnosis sometimes turned comical. The December 5th issue for example began a multi-installment essay penned by Gilbert Chiếu which declared: "It's not that Chinese and Westerners are all good people, some are, some aren't. However, they all know their duty; they are concerned with building something together and profiting together." According to Chiếu, if one must be fraudulent, one should "be fraudulent with profits, not with capital". Vietnamese, on the other hand, hid money away or spent capital on frivolous personal items like jewelry for their wives.³⁶⁰ Two adjacent articles carried a similar message about Vietnamese duplicity and lack of solidarity: Nguyễn Tử Triết argued that Vietnamese willingness to cheat their countrymen had produced their backwardness, and Trần Như Lang called for a national solidarity uniting North and South in popular intellectual development [khai dân trí], invoking a phrase popularized by Phan Châu Trinh.³⁶¹ In a later issue, Trương Chất Phát argued that the Chinese succeeded because they did not suffer from the "fame-seeking disease," again echoing Lương Khắc Ninh's earlier campaigns castigating the Vietnamese for their unearned vanity.³⁶²

Contributors ridiculed Vietnamese habits even outside of business contexts. In one essay, Gilbert Chiếu wrote that "Every country, whether West or East, South or North, whether their skin is yellow, white, red or black, puts righteousness and propriety above all. What is righteousness and propriety? It is to follow customs, to be well mannered in the way proper to one's country." But, because of misbehaving Vietnamese, "the whole country bears a poor reputation with foreigners." What did such misbehavior entail? "We enter the luxurious homes of fine people but

³⁶⁰ Chủ bút "Cô chường nan minh" *LTTV* 4, Dec. 5, 1907.

³⁶¹ Nguyễn Tử Triết "Dung Cộ"; Trần Như Lang, "Tân ca đẳng" *LTTV* 4, Dec 5, 1907. The term may be a reference to Phan Châu Trinh, who popularized it.

³⁶² Trương Chất Phát, "Háo danh bịnh", *LTTV* 6, Dec 19, 1907.

don't conduct ourselves well, we smoke and chew betel and spit everywhere, we kick our feet up on the chairs, we laugh loudly and speak loudly and disgust those around us. Behaving thus, how can we escape the poor reputation we've brought on our people."³⁶³ For Gilbert Chiếu, Vietnamese business failure reflected a crisis of dignity and refinement, Vietnamese could not move easily in spaces of power and prestige.³⁶⁴

Superstition

Religion, more than policy, drew the most sustained debate in the early issues. The debate had run for three months across *Talking Business* and *Six Provinces News*, dating at least to Trước Nguyên's article in the Minh Tân Manifesto. Gilbert Chiếu carried it into *Six Provinces News* with a debut-issue article demanding to "return Buddha to India and Guandi to China." I have not been able to consult that issue, but the December 5 installment, "Render unto buddha that which belongs to Buddha," gives a sense of the debate. There, Gilbert Chiếu argues that, apart from the rare well-intentioned monk, Buddhists are lazy tax dodgers who survive by embezzling communal wealth. Christianity, he adds, has the same problem. He closes by connecting the problem to foreignness, "Buddha is a Chetty, though our heart be pure and wish to make an offering, it would be better to just send your silver to the Chetties so they can sell their fabric and make the prayers for themselves. Thinking it over, everything we do is in the hands of Chetties and Chinese, thirty generations have passed and we are still slaves to Chetties and Chinese!"³⁶⁵

Though only fragments remain, the argument became heated. One person wrote in to demand Jesus be sent back to Rome, and even Confucius's foreignness was called into question.³⁶⁶ The debate spanned five submissions in issue 5, four in issue 6, and five in issue 7—making it far and

³⁶³ Chủ bút, "Quân tử bất trọng tắc bất oai" *LTTV* 5, Dec 12, 1907

³⁶⁴ An unexpected dimension of this attack on backward habits is a series of articles on Cambodian emperor Sisowath's reforms of royal sumptuary codes. Chiếu opens issue 4 by translating the new Cambodian policy into Vietnamese, and commenting, "Oh that even our neighbors enjoy such achievements, while in Cochinchina we are constantly kowtowing, and the chieftains still constantly force us to kowtow to them!" Later in the month, an open letter to the Vietnamese colonial councillors signed by X.X. championed the policy. This shows the magazine was an instrument for exerting political pressure on Vietnamese elected representative. Cambodia from now on in all affairs of state will follow French customs. This is indeed a commendable policy which should be emulated. Think carefully, if the Cambodians can undertake such a transformation, are we Annameese so beneath them that we must follow old customs, what if a few millions of our countrymen kowtow to ask our six councilmen to petition their superiors to reform Annameese customs and follow the French rites, which is to say to abolish the kowtow. [...] You men have the power of representing the six provinces, so please reform these negative customs, because if you follow the old ways, it is the village notables who abuse their power and mistreat and extort the commoner [dân ngu], and in every circumstance force them to kowtow" "Minh quân," *LTTV* 4, Dec. 5, 1907.; X.X. "Trừ Tệ" *LTTV* 7, December 26, 1907; another interesting commentary on village notables and the problems of local government was P.n. Chiếu "Phụng đáp bài hương thông," *LTTV* 6, Dec 19, 1907. This article addressed the problem of rival oligarchic factions which enroll bands of toughs as the root of village dysfunction.

³⁶⁵ Chủ bút, "Của bụt phải trả lại cho bụt," *LTTV* 4, Dec 5, 1907.

³⁶⁶ Trần Ngọc Lộ of Mỹ Tho mocked other participants for wishing to return buddha to India and Guandi to China, while still calling themselves Confucians, apparently unaware that Confucius too was from China. Lo then quotes an October 14 article by Lê Minh Điều, presumably in *Talking Business* which stated "How I wish I could return Buddha to India, but first I ask you, sir, to invite our Christian countrymen to return their religion to Rome." To Lo, his brethren were "getting the cart before the horse", trying to determine which of Vietnam's "four religions" was the orthodox one, before resolving the problem of cultural reform and business and educational strengthening. Lo's moderating voice was joined in the subsequent article by another submission which likewise singled out a number of specific arguments the author found unjustified, before concluding that, "I'll only add one thing about the three men who want to send Buddha back to India and Guangong back to China. Gentlemen! Though I've long been a reader of this newspaper, I fear you men will defy me! We are on the path to civilization, but you men are too hot!"

away the most contentious issue of December 1907. At one point Islam, Theosophy, and Martin Luther were invoked for comparison.³⁶⁷ I cannot summarize the full debate here, but two conclusions stand out from its tangential and intense character. First, the movement's writers were hostile to the religious strands scholars often gather under "Cochinchinese peasant millenarianism," that is, the corrupt bonzes who stood for Buddhism and Guandi for the Chinese-style secret societies. For Gilbert Chiếu and his colleagues, as I showed in chapter four with Nguyễn Liên Phong, these stood for the worst of superstition and were foreign in origin. Nationalist historians like Sơn Nam follow Georges Coulet's colonial-police interpretation in supposing a secret affinity between Minh Tân and peasant "secret societies"; the public commentary from the writers themselves shows otherwise.

Second, the debate ran into a contradiction in the desire for Vietnamese ethnonational purity: removing the foreign element would leave nothing. Moderates who urged calm enlarged the traditional three religions [tam giáo] to four religions [tứ giáo]: Christianity, Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism. Interestingly, Cao Daism would later resolve this contradiction. Despite drawing on the foreign religions the manifesto attacked, in the mid 1920s it unified the 'four religions', along with much of the Orchard Heartland elite under colonial councilor Lê Văn Trung, who would with a year take over *Talking Business* to lead the campaign against the Minh Tân movement.³⁶⁸

Anticolonialism or Accommodation?

Lê Văn Trung would become the public nemesis of the Minh Tân movement in less than a year, which makes it tempting to read an anti-elitist line into the December 1907 issues. But the newspaper issues themselves resist that reading. Six Provinces News showed warm relations between the Vietnamese elite and the French settlers, and contributors justified at length the French colonial project and the collaborator elite, which is not what one expects in the party organ of a subversive revolutionary movement.

For example, in a December 5th article, frequent contributor Nguyễn Minh Triết praised seven men from Long Xuyên for investing \$12,000 and three men from Trà Vinh for investing \$15,000 in Chiếu's Reform Incorporated, an act embodying the Confucian virtues of "benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and faith all in one."³⁶⁹ Nguyễn Minh Triết also portrayed opponents of the investment as shortsighted, cheap, and guilty of a xenophobic trespass against Confucian values of universal humanity: "[These men] won't spare the smallest cent, even muttering 'barbarians' as a justification. But open your eyes to see, men from the four corners of the earth also have a soul [*hữu tánh*], whether East or West, North or South, all lands have decent men [*người tử tế*]." I infer from the Confucian framing of Nguyễn Minh Triết's defense that some

³⁶⁷ Lê đất Bằng, "Học tập" *LTTV* 6, Dec 9, 1907. The full list for December. Nguyễn Viên Kiều "Đáp từ với Lê Minh Diêu" *LTTV* 5, Dec 12, 1907.; Thốc sơn, "Giác mộng thần chung" *LTTV* 5, Dec 12, 1907; Trần Ngọc Lộ, "Monsieur Chủ bút" *LTTV* 5, Dec 12, 1907; Phạm Công Thanh, "Phụng đáp công ngọc dĩ thổ", Dec 12, 1907.; Nguyễn Trọng Quyền, "Thời sự chi ngôn," *LTTV* 5, Dec 12, 1907.; Lê đất Bằng, "Học tập" *LTTV* 6, Dec 9, 1907.; Huỳnh Công Thiệu, "Phá ngục luận", *LTTV* 6, Dec 19 1907.; Nguyễn Tử Tiên, "Thơ Tín" *LTTV* 6, Dec 19, 1907.; Nguyễn Trọng Quyền, "Thời sự chi ngôn" *LTTV* 6, Dec 19 1907; Trần Khắc Ninh, "Chà, chệch tương tranh," *LTTV* 7, Dec 26, 1907; Tô văn ngữ, "Minh đạo chi từ" *LTTV* 7, Dec 26, 1907; Hoà Nam, "Ngoan thạch điểm đầu", *LTTV* 7, Dec 26, 1907.; Hồ thành chương, "Xả cự tòng tân khứ tà qui chánh" *LTTV* 7, Dec 26, 1907 Huỳnh Công Thiệu, "Y Gia vẫn nạn", *LTTV* 7, Dec 26, 1907.

³⁶⁸ See chapter nine.

³⁶⁹ Nguyễn Minh Triết, "Dương nhơn chi thiện," *Lục Tỉnh Tân Văn* 4, December 5, 1907, 5.

figures in the Delta looked down on Gilbert Chiếu for his close relations with French colonists, several of whom were lending material support to the early movement.

Gilbert Chiếu also sought favors privately from French colonial officials to staff Minh Tân enterprises. In December 1907, he had his lawyer Aymard write to the Governor of Cochinchina to request to help search for candidate vocational instructors for his planned factory from among the colonial infantry.³⁷⁰ No sufficiently experienced soldiers were available, but the exchange showed warm relations between the movement and the authorities. French administrators generally favored Vietnamese initiatives that undermined Chinese commercial power.

These private relations frequently matched the newspaper's public stance. The newspaper praised figures of demonstrated loyalty to the French colonial project. One unsigned article, presumably by Gilbert Chiếu or Nguyễn An Khương, reported on a celebration held in Bến Tre on November 15, where "a few clerks in the provincial government" [*mấy ông mấy thầy bên Ty-phan*] sold stock in a new retail house called Southern Strength [*Nam Hưng*].³⁷¹ The report quoted at length from speeches by the local district chief [*tri huyện*] Trương Minh Hỷ and the retired colonial military officer Bùi Quang Nho, both as trusted a colonial servant as any in the Delta. Pierre Jeantet, the newspaper's French owner, wrote an article praising a privately French-owned vocational school in Biên Hoà as a Minh Tân model.³⁷² A local Vietnamese man from Sóc Trăng submitted an article praising a French doctor for his devoted and often unpaid service to the Vietnamese poor.³⁷³ The newspaper likewise celebrated the Vietnamese representatives in the Colonial Council. Huỳnh Ngọc Liễn from the Orchard Heartland stronghold of Cái Bè praised colonial councilors Dương Văn Mên, Diệp Văn Cương, and Lê Văn Trung for bidding on the provincial alcohol monopoly, noting that Lê Văn Trung had a reputation for refusing to franchise the monopoly to local Chinese. Chiếu himself commented below the article: "If what you say comes to pass, and Lê Văn Trung continues as he has done thus far, then not only will he be praised by the people of his district, all our countrymen will come together in praise for his good heart." Lê Văn Trung and Diệp Văn Cương would soon become state agents in the unraveling of the movement.³⁷⁴

An account Gilbert Chiếu published of a Christmas Eve banquet at the home of Đốc phủ Vị settles any remaining doubt about the intimacy between movement leaders and the French and Vietnamese collaborator elite.³⁷⁵ Despite feeling unwell and planning to sleep for the night, Chiếu braved an unseasonable December rainstorm after Pierre Jeantet arrived by coach and urged him to come along. A coterie of French and Vietnamese notables attended: colonial council fixtures like doctors Montel and Dejean de la Bâtie; French press figures Pierre Jeantet and A. Crochet, chief editor of *Le Petit Saigon* and political director of François Canavaggio's *Le Colon*; and Vietnamese collaborator elites including Diệp Văn Cương and members of the Lê Phát clan, by general consensus the wealthiest Vietnamese of the colonial era and trusted Catholic allies of the colonial administration. Guests played cards and enjoyed liquor and champagne while Lê Phát Thanh's daughter played the piano. At 11pm they left to attend

³⁷⁰ No. 18881 "Dossier relatif aux sociétés indigènes fondées dans les diverses provinces années 1904-1917" TDNK TTLTQG2

³⁷¹ "Trưng cuộc chiêu thương," *Lục Tỉnh Tân Văn* 4, December 5, 1907.

³⁷² "Bá nghệ trường," *Lục Tỉnh Tân Văn* 6, December 19, 1907.

³⁷³ Nguyễn Hữu Tiên, "Nhơn thuật đáng mến," *Lục Tỉnh Tân Văn* 6, December 19, 1907.

³⁷⁴ See Chapter 9

³⁷⁵ Chủ bút, "Hạ Thiên Chúa giáng sanh: Lễ thành dạ yến (Réveillon)," *Lục Tỉnh Tân Văn* 7, December 26, 1907.

midnight Mass, only to return and continue the festivities deep into the night. Gilbert Chiếu published this account under his alias Trần Nhật Thăng, noting Gilbert Chiếu's attendance at the event as though they were two different people. From whom was Chiếu hiding his identity? Surely not the colons and Vietnamese notables who attended the intimate soirée and would have been aware of Trần Nhật Thăng's nonexistence. According to Lê Hoàng Mưu, Diệp Văn Cương, who attended the party and who personally compiled evidence leading to Gilbert Chiếu's arrest, was the very Vietnamese agent charged with monitoring and censoring the Vietnamese-language press.³⁷⁶ The only plausible targets of the deception were therefore the readers, but to what end remains unclear, since within months Gilbert Chiếu would drop the pen name and assume the chief editorship publicly. Whatever his calculation, the publication of this account is hard to square with a newspaper supposedly dedicated to overthrowing French colonial rule.

I have argued for a portrait of Gilbert Chiếu's journalism that downplays anti-colonial and anti-French messaging and treats the Minh Tân movement as a continuation of the business and cultural reform project Lương Khắc Ninh had been advocating since 1901. After the 1904 storms and the gentry mobilization that followed, Gilbert Chiếu's energy carried the program forward; he and Pierre Jeantet opened a second newspaper to publish the surplus material and concentrate on Minh Tân institution-building. The campaign was closely tied to prominent French colons, and potential Vietnamese investors appear to have understood this, since Gilbert Chiếu attempted to assuage them with appeals to universal Confucian humanity and accounts of virtuous French individuals. Where the historiography has emphasized the anti-colonial and downplayed the bourgeois, I have argued the reverse: these men were bourgeois reformers, and what anti-colonial expression they produced was incidental to that.

There are two pieces of countervailing evidence. The first is Gilbert Chiếu's relation to Phan Bội Châu and the Đông Du movement, which proved decisive in his fall from grace. I discuss these relations in the context of the movement's dissolution in Chapter 9. The second is that Gilbert Chiếu drew suspicion, on some readings, by publishing anti-French material in *Six Provinces News*. Marr, for example, writes that the paper "in particular, published subtle, yet risky, articles on such matters as agricultural aid groups and popular financial cooperatives, even implying support of political insurrections if the government failed to move to alleviate rural problems."³⁷⁷ Sơn Nam, the movement's leading midcentury Vietnamese historian, points to several articles as embodying the anti-French impetus of the newspaper; two of them appear in the December 1907 issues.

The first, "Injustice above makes riots below," published December 12th, presumably corresponds to the article Marr describes as implying support for political insurrections.³⁷⁸ Sơn Nam comments more cautiously that it "caused the colonists to fear, since G. Chiếu wrote too zealously and showed himself to be an opponent."³⁷⁹ Upon closer inspection, I find the content is ambiguous at best. Gilbert Chiếu wrote the article in response to reports that senior Vietnamese officials would be posted to the market towns of the Orchard Heartland; he agreed that this was

³⁷⁶ Lê Hoàng Mưu, "Un Hương Nhắc Lại Bốn Mươi Năm Xưa," *Thời Thế-Grand Quotidiens d'informations Illustré*, November 28, 1940.

³⁷⁷ Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism 1885-1925*, 144. Note that the description misrepresents aid groups and cooperatives as inherently "risky," when in fact the colonial administration actively encouraged such institutions. The development of the anti-colonial narrative will be developed more fully in Chapter 8.

³⁷⁸ Chủ bút "Thượng bất chánh hạ tắc loạn," *LTTV* 5, December 12, 1907.

³⁷⁹ Sơn Nam, *Phong trào Duy Tân ở Bắc, Trung, Nam*, 365.

the proper nature of government but cautioned the officials against allowing "knaves" [quân tiểu nhon] to use their authority for vengeance. He asked them to "have pity on the people who are highly taxed, who have just passed through a devastating flood, and have fled in hunger [from their debts]." The article's closing passage makes its actual agenda clear:

You officials are Annamites, the villagers, their notables, the canton chiefs, and provincial councilors are also Annamites. Now that the State is allowing Annamites to govern Annamites, we must maintain harmony between higher and lower ranks, the higher ranks must love the commoners, the commoners must respect and defer to authority, only thus would be proper! So I ask you officials instruct the villages to each found a school, to teach the people, boys and girls alike, to know propriety, for men to obey the three moral bonds and the five constant virtues, and to teach women the three obediences and four virtues, to eradicate the bands of thugs, to establish emergency steamships to combat piracy, to call upon Annamites to awaken and compete for profits, to encourage the wealthy to incorporate and sell their rice, to buy passenger ships and start transportation companies, and so on. If this can be done, then we will raise funds to establish a pagoda to forever praise you officials.

The article has little to say about the French. Only the title is provocative. In content, the piece resembles the Gilbert Chiếu's controversial 1905 article in the French-language *L'Avenir du Tonkin* discussed above. What Gilbert Chiếu demanded of these Vietnamese officials was a reformist program: building schools, founding native big business, suppressing piracy and vice, the same agenda *Talking Business* had outlined earlier in the decade. Chapter eight will show how the colonial police distorted the interpretation of this article, what matters here is that the article was at most a mild criticism of Vietnamese, not French, officials.

However, the other article is remarkably blunt in its criticism of the French colonial regime. "Stepfather and stepchildren" appeared in the December 5 issue.³⁸⁰ Though Marr did not reference it, Georges Coulet identified the piece, and midcentury nationalist Vietnamese historians subsequently relied on Coulet, inverting his political commitments but keeping his interpretations intact.³⁸¹ The article is an allegory. The protagonist, symbolizing France, is a man named Lê Thái Vận [Lê Great Fortune] from the province of Tây Ninh. Tây, meaning west, is a common appellation for Frenchmen, and still today Tây Ninh province serves as wordplay for the west and westerners. Vận is described as "a poor man who had a wealthy man's habits, he was fierce, had many children, but didn't have the farmland to feed them. He was, however, a talented shipbuilder and merchant who often travelled abroad, he travelled to Phnom Penh, where he met Nguyễn Thị Đước." Ms. Đước was a wealthy and honest woman. Vận, with an eye to her fortune, was "at first very well mannered" with Đước. They married, and Vận professed that he would only mind his own fortune, that he never encroached on that which belonged to others. Soon, however, Vận "began using Đước's authority to abuse the common people." He "ordered his stepchildren around like ants" and had them pay a host of taxes, the proceeds from which all accrued to him. He grew infatuated with his "15 and 16-year-old" stepdaughters and made them his wives. When the village was outraged, he cowed them with violence. After his first wife died, he married four more. The first, Phúc, died shortly thereafter. The second, Dục,

³⁸⁰ La Ma Hoà Thượng, "Cha ghè con ghẻ", LTTV 5, Dec 5, 1907.; See also: Sơn Nam, *Phong trào Duy Tân ở Bắc, Trung, Nam*, 352.

³⁸¹ See chapter eight.

grew to despise his philandering [rượu trà bài bạc]. A third, Ngôi, wanted to separate, but he wouldn't allow it, and after their fights came to blows, he sent her back to his homeland where she was forced to wed his son from another marriage. He then married his wife's granddaughter, Thai Thị Thiên, a mere child, but nonetheless wise to recognize his greed and inhumanity, and therefore "feigned madness." He grew to despise Thiên, and put her up in a different house, but, fearing she would find another man, "kept her caged up like an animal." From among Thiên's children he chose a girl who was

very young and naïve, and he seduced her, sleeping with her as though husband and wife. Since she was but a child, if he told her to lay on her belly she did, if he told her to go down on him [sút dưới háng], she did. Goodness gracious! What sort of human being is so selfish and malicious, to steal another's wife, to go into their home and rape their daughters, to take possession of their fortune, and to steal it! To harm them so, and to grow rich in the process by all sorts of vicious, vile, disloyal improprieties. How could one love such a man as Lê Thái Vận, how could one serve such a man and be at peace!

The allegory is unsubtle enough to decode straightforwardly. Lê Thái Vận from Tây Ninh is France. The first wife, Nguyễn Thị Đức, is Emperor Tự Đức, who sat on the throne when the 1862 Treaty of Saigon ceded the three eastern provinces of Cochinchina to France -- the "marriage" in which Vận professed his justice and egalitarianism. The quick passing of subsequent wives Dục and Phúc represents the tumultuous two-year interval between emperors Dục Đức and Kiến Phúc (1883–1884). Ngôi, who fought with Vận, is Hàm Nghi, the child emperor whose regents took him to the maquis during the 1885 Save the King Rebellion. Her exile to Vận's son's homeland refers to the French exile of Hàm Nghi to Algiers. By transposing phonemes in a manner typical of Vietnamese wordplay, Thai Thiên becomes Emperor Thành Thái, deposed for his alleged "madness" only two months before the publication of this article. The final unnamed wife, the child victim of Vận's sexual abuse, is the new child emperor Duy Tân.

The story is signed with the pen name "La-ma Hoà Thượng." Whether or not Gilbert Chiếu wrote it himself, its publication shows at the least his agreement with the sentiments. The piece is sharp enough to make it tempting to read its tone as a remnant of Cochinchinese anti-colonialism and to place the Minh Tân movement in continuity with the irregular warfare that met the nineteenth-century French colonial conquest. Sơn Nam favors this reading and other midcentury Vietnamese writers have followed him. Drawing from Coulet, he set the story alongside a reader submission praising the nineteenth-century Rạch Giá rebel Nguyễn Trung Trực for his royal fealty, while comparing Gilbert Chiếu to the Chinese reformer Liang Qichao.³⁸²

I think the scholarly emphasis on the handful of confrontational articles elides the bulk of *Six Provinces News's* propaganda, which promoted colonial collaboration across political and economic projects. This article must be understood in the context of the recent deposition of Emperor Thành Thái. As argued in chapter four, Thành Thái had come to symbolize the modernizing hopes of the renovationist gentry and the lodestar of their accommodation. His 1897 trip to Cochinchina drew large public crowds and were probably formative for the men in thirties and forties in 1908. Furthermore, the king's modernist and francophone sensibilities lent

³⁸² Even this article is much more ambiguous than portrayed; Trung Trực is criticized for the short-sightedness of his loyalty. Sơn Nam, *Miền Nam đầu thế kỷ XX*, 358.

legitimacy to the new Cochinchinese gentry forms of distinction, and by paying homage to his Mekong forebears he reunited a Delta elite that had been riven by lingering civil strife wrought by colonization. In this context, the article and the Minh Tân movement as a whole appeared at a moment of Mekong gentry ambivalence: the French usurpation of Nguyễn authority had humiliated the program of colonial accommodation under the Franco-Nguyễn Détente. By the second issue, Gilbert Chiếu had published poems attacking Vietnamese who supported the deposition.³⁸³ French colons themselves furthermore were divided on the deposition, and it is plausible that Gilbert Chiếu thought his criticism of it, while certainly provocative, fell within the bounds of French colonial self-satire.

A subsequent article lends credence to the interpretation that Thành Thái, not France, was the crux of the movement's anger. "Witnessing his majesty" [Kiến Giá] recounts Gilbert Chiếu and Pierre Jeantet visiting Thành Thái at the Continental Hotel Restaurant on January 9, 1908, as the emperor travelled through Saigon to his informal exile in Vũng Tàu.³⁸⁴ Two features stand out. First, the article describes Thành Thái in terms that stressed his compatibility with the Cochinchinese elite world: he "was an excellent French speaker, and in all ways a man of reform [trọn việc đều duy tân]"; he "cut his hair, had a mustache, chewed betel and he wore clothing just like the Cochinchinese." Later that evening Gilbert Chiếu encountered him again at the French opera house, which signaled his comfort in colonial settings. Second, the article downplays French responsibility for the deposition. Gilbert Chiếu stresses Pierre Jeantet's participation in the meeting, and Thành Thái's own reported response to their concerns exonerates the French: "For those who are most ignorant, it is saddening, but indeed this event is the fault of my Annamese ministers, because I am forthright, while the ministers are selfish, from whence arose the plots to replace me. The French officials have no grievance with me."

Why would a political movement whose chief objective was to drum up gentry support for anti-colonial rebellion in allegiance with a royal pretender in Japan go through such lengths to absolve French blame? And why would such an exoneration follow so closely on the heels of the provocative "Stepfather and Stepchildren"? Perhaps Gilbert Chiếu knew his criticisms had gone too far and was retreating to a safer position. Whatever his rationale, I believe much of the historiographical confusion engendered by the movement's contradictory features arises from a mistaken evaluation of its priorities. The indispensable element of the Minh Tân Movement was the gentry program of business strengthening against Chinese and Indian commercial competition, understood as the chief means toward national rejuvenation. Allegiance to Cường Để and Phan Bội Châu, or to Thành Thái, or to the French, or to this or that religious tradition, remained peripheral to that anti-Chinese commercial program. They were contested issues within the party, but never the line distinguishing friend from foe. The anti-immigrant pro-business program was the determining commitment; the Go East Movement was a significant minority dimension within Minh Tân Movement, central to the goal of founding military academies, but not the litmus test of the movement's politics.

³⁸³ "Trăng lu vi bởi đám mây," *Lục Tinh Tân Văn* 2, November 21, 1907.

³⁸⁴ Presented in full in Sơn Nam, *Miền Nam đầu thế kỷ XX*, 356. Sơn Nam's citation lists only "front page of issue number 9," which, assuming three weeks from issue 7 on December 26, would place the publication date in early January 1908.

Conclusion

I have argued that the ideology of the Minh Tân movement, as he articulated in the *Manifesto* and the pages of *Six Provinces News* and *Talking Business*, crystallized the anti-Chinese commercial nationalist program Lương Khắc Ninh had first advanced in 1901, rather than breaking from it. The Manifesto's diagnosis was identical to Lương Khắc Ninh's: Vietnamese economic subjugation at the hands of Chinese and Indian immigrants was the existential threat, and Vietnamese moral deficiencies, such as mutual distrust, excessive saving, frivolous spending, susceptibility to foreign superstitions, enabled immigrant dominance. Its prescription was likewise inherited from Lương Khắc Ninh: capital concentration through joint-stock enterprise, gentry-led investment, popular education, and the cultivation of business ethics grounded in traditional Confucian virtues of trustworthiness, righteousness, and duty. Gilbert Chiếu added formal coherence and urgency. By compiling the lead editorials into a standalone pamphlet and disseminating his program through a second newspaper built as the organ of a new political movement, he turned a scattered set of editorial exhortations into something approaching a party ideology.

A close reading of the early issues of *Six Provinces News* reinforces this portrait and complicates the image colonial police and their historiographical inheritors have left us. Most of the newspaper's content (editorials on business culture and national solidarity, attacks on backward customs and foreign superstitions, praise for Vietnamese collaborator elites and their French associates, even the religion debate) points to bourgeois self-strengthening under colonial accommodation, not to anti-colonial subversion. The handful of confrontational articles, above all the allegory "Stepfather and Stepchildren," make sense only in the context of the Thành Thái deposition, an event that shook the Franco-Nguyễn Détente without overturning it. Even at the movement's most daring, the line that distinguished friend from foe held: the enemy remained Chinese and Indian commercial encroachment, never French sovereignty.

Yet Lương Khắc Ninh had been making similar arguments for half a decade without mobilizing a single piaster of gentry investment. If Gilbert Chiếu's contribution had been limited to restating Lương Khắc Ninh's program in more systematic form, there would be little reason to expect a different outcome. Gilbert Chiếu's distinctive achievement was institutional. The following chapter examines the organizations he and his associates built to implement the Manifesto's vision: the industrial-vocational centers designed to concentrate capital and train Vietnamese youth in technical skills, the social centers serving as venues for elite coordination and movement logistics, and the autonomous grassroots initiatives the readership undertook on its own under the banner of Enlightened Renewal.

Chapter 7. The Business Logic of ‘Enlightened Renewal’

The previous chapter reconstructed the ideology of the Minh Tân Movement as set out by Gilbert Chiếu in his Manifesto and the newspaper *Six Provinces News*. Through his writing Gilbert Chiếu elaborated an anti-Chinese program which saw capital concentration and vocational training as the key to moral renewal, and which drew as much from the worldview of the Orchard Heartland gentry as the political programs of Chinese reformers. This chapter extends that analysis by examining the institutions Chiếu developed as part of the movement.

This chapter’s argument is straightforward: advertisements, charters, investor rolls, and letters to the editor preserved in the contemporary press reveal a coherent economic strategy that existing scholarship has misread. Historians have treated the Minh Tân institutions as mere staging posts for surreptitious student travel to Japan and conduits for anticolonial propaganda. I demonstrate that this reading obscures the public functions around which these institutions were organized, which included shareholder meetings, consignment services, legal aid, electoral debates, and the construction of distinctly Vietnamese business and recreational spaces.

The chapter has three parts. I first examine the core institutions directly founded under Gilbert Chiếu’s leadership and corresponding directly to the strategies set out in his manifesto. These were industrial-vocational centers designed to compete for market share against Chinese middlemen, and social centers that addressed the structural disadvantages facing Vietnamese businessmen in Saigon and the Mekong towns. I then turn to the eighteen or more autonomous enterprises that provincial notables launched independently under the Minh Tân banner, initiatives that confirm the movement’s roots in the canton-level administrative elite of the Orchard Heartlands. Finally, I map the full geography of the movement’s twenty-six known organizations to show that social centers clustered in Saigon, productive enterprises concentrated in Mỹ Tho and the near-delta provinces, and grassroots shops distributed across the interior. This distribution corroborates my previous assessments that the movement was based in a traditional provincial rural elite and not alienated francophone urban intellectuals.³⁸⁵

Industrial-Vocational Centers

The Minh Tân Movement begins with Gilbert Chiếu’s call for a Reform Incorporated in *Talking Business* on July 13th, 1907.³⁸⁶ From that date until his arrest in 1909, Vietnamese business organizations proliferated across Cochinchina. A discrete network of actors bound the core institutions together. Gilbert Chiếu led these organizations directly and united them under the broader vision for reform as laid out in the Minh Tân Manifesto. There were seven core institutions. The previous chapter already discussed the two media organizations -- *Talking Business* and *Six Provinces News*. I divide the remaining five institutions into two types: industrial-vocational centers and social centers. Chiếu intended the industrial-vocational centers to be focal points of capital concentration and skill development. The social centers, on the other hand, played a supplementary role by providing linkage services, such as legal counsel,

³⁸⁵ This is the interpretation favored by Smith, “The Development of Opposition to French Rule in Southern Vietnam 1880-1940.”

³⁸⁶ “Duy Tân Công ty” NCMD 303, 13 July, 1907 cited in Phạm Long Điền, “Vai Trò Của Nông Cổ Mín Đàm Trong Phong Trào Duy Tân Miền Nam.”

consignment facilitation, skill development, and social networking to travelling Mekong businessmen.³⁸⁷

In addition to the core institutions, there were also a host of ancillary projects promoted under the Minh Tân banner. Although these institutions reveal little about the movement's leaders, they shed light on the reach and character of the movement's grassroots activation. Whereas the fate of these ancillary projects remains a mystery, Gilbert Chiếu's creditors liquidated most core institutions to recover his debts after his arrest in late 1908. Thus, while the movement succeeded in pushing the Cochinchinese elite into political action out of passivity, it left no permanent institutional legacy. Elite institution building restarted from scratch in the 1910s through state sponsored institutions, which allowed them to incubate in a low risk environment at the cost of their ultimate independence.³⁸⁸ Notwithstanding the short life of these organizations, their story is worth telling because, the breadth of their business activities and their spatial distribution reveals the outlines of a Vietnamese business class in its political adolescence as it first asserted its political importance. This evidence further undermines the dominant orthodox interpretation of the Reform Movement, which argues that the events were largely unrelated to the development of novel Vietnamese class structures.³⁸⁹

Enlightened Renewal Industrial Corporation of Cochinchina - *Nam Kỳ Minh Tân Công Nghệ*

First proposed as Reform INC., Enlightened Renewal Industrial Corporation was the movement's flagship organization. Gilbert Chiếu posted the initial stock offering in July 1907, offering 20,000 shares at \$5 a share, for a market capitalization of \$100,000 piasters. Letters from *Talking Business's* readership poured in dedicating poems of support and pledging to invest.³⁹⁰ On September 17th Chiếu posted the charter of the new firm, describing his intent.

We intend to establish in Mỹ Tho City numerous trading houses. We will bring in skilled laborers [*thợ giỏi*] to demonstrate the industrial process [*bày cuộc công nghệ ra*] in order to, first, instruct the children of the investors in the practice of business, and secondarily to sell domestic consumer goods. Since domestically produced goods face no import duties and student wages are low, we will be able to sell cheap. Whatever imported foreign goods sell for three piasters, we will make identical ones and sell for only one piaster.

His original plan was thus to take advantage of the existing import duties as an opportunity for import substitution industrialization.³⁹¹ The business continued to develop over the summer and

³⁸⁷ I take the linkage concept from Hirschman, and will unpack it later in the chapter. See: "A Generalized Linkage Approach to Development, with Special Reference to Staples," in *The Essential Hirschman*, by Albert O. Hirschman (Princeton University Press, 2013).

³⁸⁸ See chapter 10 of this dissertation.

³⁸⁹ This position is most clearly laid out in Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism 1885-1925*, 202.

³⁹⁰ Duy Tân Công Ty was the name of the company; the name was later changed to Nam Kỳ Minh Tân Công Nghệ after the name Duy Tân was taken by the new emperor in the fall. These issues of NCMD have been lost, so information is drawn from Phạm Long Điền, "Vai Trò Của Nông Cổ Mìn Đàm Trong Phong Trào Duy Tân Miền Nam."

³⁹¹ French tariffs were implemented in 1892. They were designed to, and succeeded at, deterring the colonies from importing British goods while encouraging metropolitan imports in their stead. While Chiếu expresses an I.S.I. strategic logic, the tariffs were not designed to support industrial growth in the colony. For success of these policies,

fall. On October 1st, Gilbert Chiếu reacted to the French deposing emperor Thành Thái and the ascension of the child Emperor Duy Tân by publishing an article changing the company's name from Reform Incorporated to Enlightened Renewal Incorporated in compliance with the traditional prohibitions on invoking the emperor's title.³⁹² By the end of the year, *Talking Business* announced that it had thus far found 1,802 investors in Enlightened Renewal Incorporated, who purchased 11,837 shares accounting for 57,665 piasters.³⁹³ This was far short of the hoped for 100,000, but it was still a significant sum.

Meanwhile, Gilbert Chiếu used backchannels with the French settler community and Cochinchinese colonial administration to recruit vocational instructors.³⁹⁴ His French attorney, Aymard, sent a letter to the Governor of Cochinchina on January 5, 1908, transmitting Chiếu's request for state assistance in founding the "*Association industrielle Annamite de Cochinchine*," an "industrial and commercial cooperative" seeking to establish workshops producing cotton, silk, leather, shoes, soap and glass. The workers were to be recruited from the ranks of the investors and their children, and the funds had already been "almost entirely collected."

Aymard reached out on behalf of Gilbert Chiếu to locate experienced French former industrial workers who might serve as vocational instructors, and to help procure equipment. Ultimately the efforts proved fruitless: the government refused to help procure equipment for fear of "arousing the legitimate protests of traders already installed in Cochinchina." Though it searched for skilled manufacturers among the colonial infantry well into late February, it only turned up a handful of former part-time workers who were too unskilled to serve as instructors. In chapter six I showed that Gilbert Chiếu's published his supposedly "anticolonial" articles in December and January. The above shows that, not only has the content of those articles been exaggerated by later colonial police reinterpretation, but he was also actively pursuing colonial state assistance for his flagship business operation while they were being written and published. It seems doubtful that a secret insurrectionist would invite scrutiny from the colonial authorities to a business operation that was a front organization for revolutionary activity.

see: Alejandro Ayuso-Díaz and Antonio Tena-Junguito, "Colonial Trade Linkages: Trade Policy and Imports in South and Southeast Asia Colonial Markets (1874–1913)," *Economic History of Developing Regions* 0, no. 0 (2025): 1–30, <https://doi.org/10.1080/20780389.2025.2568955>.

³⁹² The child emperor took the reign name Duy Tân, the same term used by reform movement activists across the colony. Traditionally invoking the emperor's reign name in vain was prohibited. Interestingly, only the supposedly more Francophile Cochinchinese activists complied with these prohibitions. Tonkinese and Annamese activists, who were under formal Imperial governance, continued to refer to the movement with this term.

³⁹³ Chiếu appended poems to his advertisements which reveal his own perception of the class alliance articulated by the movement, "I humbly beseech brothers and sisters, all outstanding talent to look at this moment. The great households of longstanding [các nhà hào họ xưa nay], the officials and gentlemen of rare heroic hands. The canton chiefs, their deputies, and assistants. Erudite Confucian Businessmen [nhò văn Nông cổ] and village notables too. Then come the schoolmates [đồng môn] who press themselves to wake up and drag their souls off to distant amusements. Why do our own kind not help our own? If they do not, our descendants will become restless ghosts, impossible to console. I urge you: do not defer with promises of tomorrow, five piasters of capital today can avert calamity; do not delay!" Colonial bureaucrats and urban clerks, while perhaps included through quan and đồng môn, are at best a minor feature in a call that focused extensively on rural traditional elites. This and the figures for market capitalization are cited in Phạm Long Điền, "Vai Trò Của Nông Cổ Mìn Đàm Trong Phong Trào Duy Tân Miền Nam," 26.

³⁹⁴ No. 18881 "Dossier relatif aux sociétés indigènes fondées dans les diverses provinces années 1904-1917" *TDNK TTLTQG2*

Around the same time Gilbert Chiếu hit a dead end with state assistance, he published a new charter in *Talking Business* on February 25, 1908. He settled on the name Enlightened Renewal Industrial Corporation of Cochinchina. At this point, Gilbert Chiếu apparently had not yet narrowed the business strategy to specific commodities. According to the charter, the “Company [was] founded with the intention to teach the youth of our land vocational skills in textiles, silk, glass, soap, tanning, paper, *et cetera*”. The charter also specified that shares were to be purchased at the two recently established social centers, South Central Hotel in Saigon, and Enlightened Renewal Hotel in Mỹ Tho, discussed below.

Note that up to this point publicity and investment for Enlightened Renewal Industrial Corporation, as well as the two hotels-- South Central Hotel Saigon and Enlightened Renewal Hotel Mỹ Tho-- were managed and showcased via *Talking Business* exclusively and not *Six Provinces News*, which by March 1908 had been publishing for 5 months. *Six Provinces News* had promoted Gilbert Chiếu and Jeantet’s “Print Company,” and Nguyễn An Khương’s “Restaurant for Vietnamese” [Chiêu Nam Lầu], as well as various autonomous gentry initiatives which the editorial board felt represented the Minh Tân Movement, but it had not yet directly posted advertisements for investment in the core movement institutions. This is odd considering that in all other respects, few distinctions separated the two publications during this time. For example, letters addressing Gilbert Chiếu’s articles in *Talking Business* would occasionally elicit a response from his alias (name it) at *Six Provinces News*, and debates would migrate from one paper to the next without any apparent logic.³⁹⁵ This unwieldy arrangement continued until late May 1908, when Chiếu officially left *Talking Business* and began operating *Six Provinces News*.

The collapse of the Minh Tân Movement will be treated more fully in chapter nine. Nonetheless it is important to note here that serious cracks in the movement began to appear in the late spring and early summer of 1908, coinciding with tax revolts that erupted in Annam in March. The first public sign of a fracturing Cochinchinese movement appeared in late May, when Gilbert Chiếu hinted that financial irregularities were straining his relationship with the owner of *Talking Business* François Canavaggio.

I’ve been chief editor of *Talking Business* for two years now, two years of tireless care, expending my own labor and wealth in our endeavor of popular intellectual flourishing [*khai dân trí*], and truly this has only been possible with the support of you Confucian gentlemen. But now the responsibilities have proven too many to bear, in part because many gentlemen haven’t paid their subscription fees, thereby causing accounting difficulties, so I’ve decided to return *Talking Business* to its owner, Mr. Canavaggio. [...] I will now bring my stock offerings to *Six Provinces News* and will here advertise additional shares in Enlightened Renewal Industrial Corporation.³⁹⁶

By this time, investors had already purchased shares. On June 1st, seventeen representatives met at the downtown Saigon office of Gilbert Chiếu’s French lawyer Aymard. Although all the shareholders were Vietnamese, an interpreter was present, hinting that some of the investors were

³⁹⁵ See the religion debate discussed in chapter six of this dissertation.

³⁹⁶ *LTTV* 27, May 21, 1908. These and other issues of *LTTV* are collected in Sơn Nam, *Phong trào Duy Tân ở Bắc, Trung, Nam*, 230.

uncomfortable conducting business in French. This implies that educational backgrounds were mixed, which makes sense because the company was overwhelmingly a Mekong Delta affair.³⁹⁷

Regional origin	Number of board members
Gia Dinh Plateau	3
Chợ Lớn	1
Sài Gòn	2
Mekong Delta	14
Gò Công	3
Mỹ Tho	6
Rạch Giá	1
Trà Vinh	2
Vĩnh Long	2
Grand Total	17

On June 17th the shareholders meeting gathered at Minh Tân Hotel Mỹ Tho to elect a board of directors and ratify a proposal to purchase land in Điều Hoà- today downtown Mỹ Tho, on the northeastern corner of the intersection made by the Bảo Định Canal and the Tiền River. On July 4th the board announced that “land purchases and factory construction was nearly complete.” Gilbert Chiêu announced that

We have nearly finished buying the land, and the kiln is almost built. We’ve sent people to Tonkin to learn match manufacturing and to hire skilled workers. The money collected so far is nearly 9,000 piasters, but there are still many who have not yet paid their share. We kindly request that they do so quickly, as the Company will soon need these funds.³⁹⁸

Hinted at here is that only a fraction of the initially promised 57,000 piasters in subscriptions was being paid. By August 16th the capital raised had grown to 10,395 piasters, and the October 22nd issue announced that 1,225 investors had thus far paid their subscriptions but didn’t provide information on total capitalization.³⁹⁹

Despite these shortfalls, *Enlightened Renewal Industrial Corporation* showed signs of progress. The company was neither a front for revolutionary activity nor a pyramid scheme. Legitimate business operations followed from the investments. On July 23rd *Talking Business* announced that the company had purchased land from a Mr. de Balmann near the Mỹ Tho bridge across from the amphitheater. The company sold high quality coconut oil to raise funds, planning to reinvest profits to process surplus coconut oil into produce soap. “Anyone who has experience in coconut oil and soap manufacture submit your application to the board of directors, wages starting at \$50 per month.”

³⁹⁷ From charter posted in Son Nam p 195, Pham Phuc Vinh discusses on page 85, but likewise cites Son Nam.

³⁹⁸ *LTTV*, July 4 1908 in Son Nam, *Phong trào Duy Tân ở Bắc, Trung, Nam*, 197.

³⁹⁹ Son Nam, *Phong trào Duy Tân ở Bắc, Trung, Nam*, 197–99; Phạm Phúc Vinh, *Phong trào Minh Tân ở Nam Kỳ*, 86–87.

The factory also served as a vocational school, and investors' children enjoyed priority for internships. Applicants needed only to send a resumé [*lý lịch*] to the board for review. On August 13th the company announced that it had hired a soap-manufacturing expert and scheduled a meeting to ratify construction of a kettle.⁴⁰⁰ Investors who wished to board their children at the school had to provide bed linens, while the company defrayed costs for room and board. Students signed seven-year contracts. They worked in two shifts. A morning shift from 6am to 10am. They took a second shift after lunch from 2pm to 5pm. Remaining hours were to be spent studying French, *quốc ngữ*, mathematics, and physical education. Sundays and holidays were rest days, and the school scheduled two-week holiday breaks for Lunar New Year and Bastille Day. The response was immediate, the following issue, on August 20th, announced that registration was nearly full and would soon be closing.

This same issue announced that the company was looking to purchase castor beans and cotton seeds. "Anyone in the Six Provinces who has them, please send a quote," a notice reported. "If you don't, you should plant some. Don't leave your land fallow and wasted, find some seeds and toss them out there, it's easy as pie [*mọc như chơi*]!". Gilbert Chiếu had abandoned initial plans for textile manufacture in favor of soap, due to "too little capital, and because investors seem reluctant."⁴⁰¹ In early September the company posted a notice seeking 100,000 dried coconuts. A few days later, on the September 5th board meeting, Chiếu requested the release of funds for the purchase of packaging materials from Europe. The September 10th issue of what? featured a two-page advertisement for the soap, *Savon Cancan*. The company proclaimed that its soap was "better than Chinese soap". A little over a month later, on October 22nd, 1908, Gilbert Chiếu bragged that "Since enlightened renewal soap has hit the market, Chinese soap has been forced to lower their prices. So, we're lowering our prices again."⁴⁰² Thus, the company appears to have been enjoying success when the colonial police arrested Gilbert Chiếu a few days later.

Gilbert Chiếu's strategy built on the efforts of predecessors and was also employed by later political and business leaders. Similar ideas frequently appeared from the first issues of *Talking Business* during Lương Khắc Ninh's tenure, where Tonkinese manufacturing superiority was seen as a source for both potential product lines and expertise which could be drawn south.⁴⁰³ Plans for importing Tonkinese expertise also drove the later interwar period's most important

⁴⁰⁰ The Vietnamese term is "lò" or furnace. The term is used across a range of domestic and industrial applications, from home ovens to industrial kilns and furnaces. The articles provide no detail into the industrial process. A low-tech process was probably necessary due to the high import costs and marginal advantages of capital equipment like steam heated cauldrons, copper coiling, and inputs like caustic soda. Coconut oil was probably mixed with potash lye and salt, then boiled in a kettle over a wood coal furnace, called a firebox. The mixture would then be drained into molds, cooled, and then sold as bricks. For production process with useful diagrams, see: F.W. Gibbs, "The History of the Manufacture of Soap," *Annals of Science*, no. 4 (1939): 169–90. It is available online at: https://digital.hagley.org/system/files/2025-06/islandora_2541282_obj.pdf

⁴⁰¹ Son Nam speculates that this reluctance may have arisen from rumors that Chiếu was already under investigation. This speculation concords with the chronology. Rumors themselves had begun appearing in the French language *L'Indochine Libérale* earlier in the spring, and then in *Talking Business* after Chiếu's ouster in May. Chiếu was sufficiently pressured that he published rebuttals starting June 11. Nevertheless, the discrepancy between subscribed and paid shares was a longstanding problem.

⁴⁰² *LTTV* 43, Sept. 10, 1908. Cited in Son Nam, *Phong trào Duy Tân ở Bắc, Trung, Nam*, 199.

⁴⁰³ For example, a vertically integrated system of producing castor beans, oil refineries, and producing manufacturing, based on Tonkinese precedents and expertise, was proposed in the second issue "Dầu đu đủ tía" *NCMD* 2, 8 Aug. 1901, 4. A straw mat factory, based on Tonkinese Chinese models and Tonkinese manufacturers technology transfer, was proposed in the fourth issue. "Chiếu Phát Diệm (Bắc Kỳ)", *NCMD* 4, 23 Aug. 1901.

piece of anti-Chinese literature, Đào Trinh Nhất, the Tonkinese journalist, completed his book-length *Chinese Power and the Issue of Cochinchinese Immigration*.⁴⁰⁴ The title is misleading. The “issue of Cochinchinese immigration” doesn’t refer to Chinese immigration into Cochinchina but rather refers to Nhất’s proposed solution to “Chinese Power”, which was to encourage Tonkinese Vietnamese immigration to drive the Chinese out. Analysis of Nhất’s work will concern chapter ten, but the text’s continued popularity testifies to the durability of the political concerns articulated by the Minh Tân Movement.

The Enlightened Renewal Rice Trust- Minh Tân Túc Mễ Tổng Cuộc

The Minh Tân Movement’s second major commercial enterprise was less successful. The Enlightened Renewal Rice Trust [hereafter “rice trust”] took aim directly at the heart of Chinese economic power. Unlike the industrial corporation, the Rice Trust doesn’t appear to have ever launched operations. Nevertheless, it deserves attention for the way it exemplifies Gilbert Chiếu’s vision for the reconquest of Vietnamese economic sovereignty.

Trần Văn Hải, a 43-year-old Canton Chief from Mỹ Tho province, published the first announcement for the rice trust in Six Provinces News on January 30, 1908. To him, the most important industry in the colony was obviously rice, but Vietnamese had been unable to capitalize on it due to a “low-shooting mentality” [*tính chịu sút của dưới*].

In the West corporations are formed that gather as many as a thousand investors, with a million piasters of capital, and they don’t waste their time personally overseeing things [*họ làm coi như chơi*], because they choose somebody with knowhow [*thông thạo*] and elevate him to leadership [*tôn làm thầy*], calling him a *General manager*. This man delegates the work, and if the company needs additional capital they must put up as collateral the register recording the total amount of money they’ve pooled together for the company, called a *Trust-company*. Then they can borrow an equivalent amount. The Chinese too have begun copying this. Now, we the people of this country aren’t simply a decorative fixture [*chẳng phải cây đá tượng hình*], we should not remain idle. Today, we are determined to select like-minded individuals among our compatriots and call upon them - any gentleman or lady who understands the work of reform.⁴⁰⁵

It is notable that the terms “General manager” and “Trust-company” appeared in English. Whether the use of English terms indexes Anglo-American preeminence in the French colonial business world, or whether it points to specific connections to Hong Kong is hard to say. Whatever the case, the introduction of foreign terms fits with the general tone of the broader movement, which is one of strategic adoption of foreign models as a remedy to a crisis of national backwardness. The obstacle confronting Hải and his comrades was a daunting one: not only did they have to establish a business, they had to convince their compatriots that it was possible to invest without having to busy oneself with the day to day management of the enterprise, all the while groping towards plausible, if only vaguely understood, growth strategies.

Contrary to R. B. Smith’s account, French-trained interpreters and clerks in the ministerial bureaucracies of the capital city did not pioneer the importation and domestication of foreign

⁴⁰⁴ Đào Trinh Nhất, *Thế-lực khách-trú và vấn đề di dân vào Nam-kỳ* (Thụy-Ký, 1924).

⁴⁰⁵ Sơn Nam, *Phong trào Duy Tân ở Bắc, Trung, Nam*, 204; Phạm Phúc Vĩnh, *Phong trào Minh Tân ở Nam Kỳ*, 89.

business institutions and terminology.⁴⁰⁶ Rural administrators of the Orchard Heartland pioneered initiatives like the rice trust. Of the eleven founding investors, five were canton chiefs and six were deputy canton chiefs. As discussed in chapter three, canton chiefs did not owe their authority to scholarly achievement in the Franco-Annamite education system. Village notables elected canton chiefs from a restricted college. French provincial governors oversaw and manipulated these elections, ostensibly to ensure the loyalty of the victors. But French manipulation did not change the fact that these men owed their authority to local clan dynamics and oligarchic village politicking, rather than the meritocracy of educational attainment. Thus, the canton chiefs were a distinct group within the Cochinchinese elite that were locally grounded with deep roots in the Orchard Heartland Gentry.⁴⁰⁷ Unlike the lower ranking ministerial clerks and higher-ranking rural administrators like the *tri huyện* or *tri phủ* who were dispatched as *deleguées* to provincial governors across the colony, the canton chiefs oversaw the districts of their home villages. In this case, the initial investors were all canton and deputy canton chiefs administering seven different cantons spread across the broader Three Ridges [*Ba Giồng*] region which makes up the historical core of 18th Century Vietnamese Mekong settlement stretching from Cái Bé- Cái Lậy to Bến Lự- Tân An.⁴⁰⁸ This is evidence that the rice trust was an initiative of a rural elite from the old clans spread across the densely settled northern and eastern banks of the Tiền River



Figure 7- Dots at approximate center points of represented cantons

A February 13, 1908, advertisement laid out their rationale.

Rice is the most profitable industry in all our dear Cochinchina, after all, not only is there so much of it, but ships endlessly arrive from all over the world hungry for more.

⁴⁰⁶ This is the interpretation favored by RB Smith in his pioneering research, and inherited by subsequent scholars, who together see in the Minh Tan Movement as the first symptoms of a pathological alienation of the urban elite and traditional peasantry tied to the land. Smith, “Bui Quang Chiêu and the Constitutionalist Party in French Cochinchina, 1917-30”; Smith, “The Development of Opposition to French Rule in Southern Vietnam 1880-1940.” See chapter one of this dissertation for a full discussion.

⁴⁰⁷ This process is detailed in chapters two and three of this dissertation.

⁴⁰⁸ See chapter two for a description of this region.

Meanwhile the Qing merchants found shop after shop, company after company. Our land holds more than 200 of these [Chinese shops] which purchase and store rice... I find it shameful, indeed it brings innumerable tears to my eyes because I know that we too have intelligent men, so why are we so ready to accept backwardness [*chịu sút*]? Is it that we are so mistrusting of one another that we refuse to unite our forces as of one heart [*đồng tâm hiệp lực*]?⁴⁰⁹

A subsequent issue expressed the ethnic conflict in even more confrontational terms, directly articulating the Orchard Heartland grievances at the center of the Minh Tân Movement,

Compatriots! As I've said, the Qing foreigners [*Thanh khách*] have not only exploited our prosperity, but they also profit from scheming, even while our finances are in such dire circumstances. For example, when our Orchard Heartland brings 500-700 sacks of rice to sell them, they insult and criticize the quality to drive down the price. How could we bring the rice back home? We're forced to take the money, and then when they weigh it, they steal a kilo or so from each sack, over the course of a year how many millions of kilos are we thereby cheated?⁴¹⁰

Initially, the founding investors hoped to raise a million piasters at two piasters a share. Subscriptions were to be purchased directly from Gilbert Chiếu at the Enlightened Renewal Hotel in Mỹ Tho. They chose Mỹ Tho as "the most convenient location," but as more investors joined, they shifted the base of operations in Saigon-Chợ Lớn. They called headquarters the Enlightened Renewal Rice Trust, and each province would host an Enlightened Rice Branch Office [*Minh Túc Mễ phân cuộc*]. Local branch shops [*tiệm cái*] in the market towns were to communicate local prices to the provincial branch offices via telegraph.⁴¹¹

A March 3rd meeting lowered the share price to one piaster with a minimum purchase of ten shares. Of twenty-five initial investors, all but four were from Mỹ Tho province: one each from the Mekong provinces of Vĩnh Long and Bến Tre, and only Gilbert Chiếu, from Rạch Giá, representing the far west. There was one investor from outside the delta, representing the eastern fringe province of Thủ Dầu Một. The initial twenty-five altogether raised \$16,980 piasters, a sizeable sum, but a far cry from the hoped for million. An April 9th update adjusted the price per share to 10 piasters and added further investors from Vĩnh Long and Thủ Dầu Một, but it was the last time the company was mentioned.

The shifting share price and sparse information gives the impression that the initial public offering did not go as planned. The company seems to have collapsed, bringing the movement's hope for directly contesting Chinese control of the rice trade along with it. A letter to the editor on August 20th, which was commenting on the attacks on Gilbert Chiếu being published in the French and Vietnamese press, remarked on the dissolution of all companies except for the Enlightened Renewal Industrial Corporation. This letter, and Gilbert Chieu's response, will be discussed in greater detail in chapter nine. However, by publishing the letter, Gilbert Chiếu tacitly acknowledged that by August the companies had, in the author's words, "gone cold" [*lạnh tanh*].

⁴⁰⁹ LTTV 13, Feb. 13, 1908, cited in Sơn Nam, *Phong trào Duy Tân ở Bắc, Trung, Nam*, 205.

⁴¹⁰ LTTV 20, April 2, 1908, cited in Sơn Nam, *Phong trào Duy Tân ở Bắc, Trung, Nam*, 206–7.

⁴¹¹ These and subsequent details are from Sơn Nam, *Phong trào Duy Tân ở Bắc, Trung, Nam*, 205–7.

Social centers

The Enlightened Renewal Industrial Corporation and Rice Trust were an expression of the movement's ideals and an effort to challenge Chinese economic power in the delta. Of all the Minh Tân institutions, these two best exemplified the long-term economic program of the Orchard Heartland Gentry; a program which was first clearly articulated by Lương Khắc Ninh in 1901, and which ran through Cochinchinese elite politics deep into the interwar period. The foundation of these corporations was paired with the development of social centers which acted as venues for Vietnamese elite civic organizing efforts and extended the reach of rural gentry networks into urban spaces. Historians have described the social centers as waystations for illicit Vietnamese student travel to Japan.⁴¹² But, in fact, they provided critical infrastructure for the business movement. They hosted shareholder meetings, legal counsel, accounting lessons, consignment services, electoral debates, and important artistic and cultural events. To employ a military metaphor, if the industrial corporation and the rice trust were “offensives” meant to expand into new territories and degrade rivals, the social centers were logistical in nature: they were designed to reinforce Vietnamese position and deliver resources to the front. Three chief social centers stand out: Gilbert Chiếu's South Central Hotel in Saigon, his Enlightened Renewal Hotel in Mỹ Tho, and Nguyễn An Khương's Restaurant for Vietnamese in Saigon.

South Central Hotel [Nam Trung Khách Sạn] - Saigon

The two hotels were the first formally established Minh Tân movement institutions, predating even *Six Provinces News*. The name South-Central is a reference to Gia Định-Chợ Lớn, as distinct from the “western” zones of the Delta. Sơn Nam speculates that the 20-room hotel occupied the “buildings at the head of Hàm Nghi boulevard, near the bus stop by the Old Market, where they sell roast pork,” a description still accurate at the time of this writing.⁴¹³ Gilbert Chiếu was the founding general manager, but later delegated the role to Trần Văn Tề, who in June 1908 assumed the roles as “Board member, treasurer and acting general manager.”⁴¹⁴

Hotel advertisements reveal the clientele had hybrid tastes. Gilbert Chiếu boasted of staff who could “speak French to serve Frenchmen” as well as “a venerable and well-cultivated man to serve native guests.”⁴¹⁵ The hotel restaurant offered a set price Vietnamese meal, and a variety of expensive western snacks, wines and spirits, such as chocolate, coffee with milk or rum, and Pernod, Dubonnet, or whisky sodas. Those in a celebratory mood could buy a bottle of Moët-Chandon. Rice wine wasn't advertised; perhaps a subtle dig at the low quality of the colonial monopoly alcohol. Readers submitted poems of praise which describe the hotel's hybrid atmosphere, “Here men from across the Six Provinces bustle, the veranda is crowded with guest from all directions, food and drink served in Vietnamese ways, chairs laid out in the Western manner.”⁴¹⁶

Despite these appeals to Western luxury, the hotel marketed itself to the cost-conscious traveler. For example, Gilbert Chiếu apologized for the prices: “I've posted prices here to be transparent,

⁴¹² Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism 1885-1925*; Tai, *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution*.

⁴¹³ Sơn Nam, *Phong trào Duy Tân ở Bắc, Trung, Nam*, 187.

⁴¹⁴ Sơn Nam cites *LTTV* 48, June 1908, 2.

⁴¹⁵ “Đãi khách Tây thì có một vị biết tiếng Tây. Đãi khách bản địa thì có một vị lão thành văn vật đủ điều, chứ vị nào đến Nam Trung thì sẽ vừa ý luôn.” *LTTV* 4, 5 Dec. 1907. Cited in Sơn Nam, *Phong trào Duy Tân ở Bắc, Trung, Nam*, 188.

⁴¹⁶ *LTTV* 35, 16 July, 1908, in Sơn Nam, *Phong trào Duy Tân ở Bắc, Trung, Nam*, 190.

gentlemen. The prices are a bit expensive, owing to the costs of the property. Whoever wishes to send a *boy* [sai bồi] to make purchases on their behalf, be sure to inform the concierge beforehand to avoid wily servants embezzling money.”

A December 5th price list corroborates the impression of cost-conscious clientele. Room options included either first class or second class rooms, with prices ranging from \$1.20 to \$0.60. But, Gilbert Chiếu hastened to add, the price was charged per room, so “it didn’t matter whether 3 or 5 individuals shared one room, the price remained the same.”⁴¹⁷ The promotional material conjures an image of a middling rural gentlemen, proud of his reputation, travelling to the city on business with a small coterie of servants and perhaps adult children who helped him manage his estate. Gilbert Chiếu’s customers desired a cosmopolitan lifestyle of the city, but lacked the budget and contacts to realize it. They were bumpkins, out of place and without local friends to host and guide them, but they were by no means proletarians toiling in urban anonymity. These men expected deference.

Such expectations animated Gilbert Chiếu’s appeal to an anti-Chinese price premium. The movement depended on Vietnamese consumers’ and investors’ willingness to bear either higher prices or higher risks in exchange for national dignity. Thus, regarding room price, Chiếu explained:

Sure, the Chinese charge only \$0.30, but they turn a profit by charging by the head, and their linens are filthy. Slobs can go stay with the Chinese, or misers too cheap to cough up an extra dime or two. Don’t forget the saying ‘wealth should serve wellbeing,’ these places are cheaper because they are ignoble. Just pay a bit more for real satisfaction and be done with it. [...If you go] three to a room, moreover, it isn’t any more expensive. Why is it when the filthy, blabbering Chinese do something nobody complains, but when one of us Annamese step forward to build something, everyone hollers from the rooftops. There is no better way than this to make profits for the Chinese, we are fated to be slaves for a thousand years.⁴¹⁸

On the one hand, the hotel was marketed as a space mixing Vietnamese and French elements at a luxurious price point mingling the finest commodities of East and West. One could enjoy a milk coffee, chocolate, or a glass of champagne, while conversing with a concierge “roundly cultivated in the ways of Confucian manners” [vị lão thành văn vật đủ điều]. On the other hand, Gilbert Chiếu was keenly aware of his clientele’s budget constraints. He was in direct competition with the Chinese, and his marketing strategy appealed to the rural notable’s pride, here expressed as his impatience for suffering the insult of substandard accommodation and his sensitivities to national disgrace.

There were, furthermore, signs that Gilbert Chiếu was struggling. The above passage equates customer complaints, the “hollering from the rooftops” [*la làng la xóm*], with a pathological Vietnamese willingness for enslavement, [*số mình còn muốn làm nô lệ 1.000 năm*]. In an article announcing the recent hiring of a new, more erudite, concierge, Chiếu took the opportunity to address complaints, “while busy in Cần Thơ and Rạch Giá I heard some gentlemen complain about a couple things in my shop. I apologize, it is a new enterprise and we had staffing delays,

⁴¹⁷ These advertisements are quoted in Sơn Nam, *Phong trào Duy Tân ở Bắc, Trung, Nam*, 188–90.

⁴¹⁸ Filthy blabbering Chinese here is “Chệt nó nói xí xô xí xào dơ dáy” Sơn Nam, *Phong trào Duy Tân ở Bắc, Trung, Nam*, 189–90.

but they've been resolved."⁴¹⁹ Within the first months of operation, clients had travelled from the furthest western reaches of the delta, and they weren't satisfied.

But what brought these men all the way from Rạch Giá? The debut issue of *Six Provinces News* characterized the services in the following terms,

Any guest with a question about anything, we your brothers will wholeheartedly provide clear guidance. Or if you are far away and wish to inquire about something, send us a letter and we will respond. Or if you wish to commission calligraphy or need ceremonial banners with couplets for occasions such as weddings, funerals, or other ritual matters, we your brothers will also wholeheartedly assist until completion, sparing no effort or difficulty. We respectfully invite fellow countrymen who have business in Saigon to stop by South Central Hotel, first to relax in comfort, second to support your countrymen to establish enterprises - isn't this killing two birds with one stone?⁴²⁰

There's nothing unusual about a concierge introducing local attractions and services around the city but offering ceremonial calligraphy services is odd. On the one hand, the service may have been another attempt to compete with Chinese entrepreneurs who dominated certain industries.⁴²¹ But on the other, providing such services was advantageous in less directly remunerative ways by strengthening trust between the hotel and local elites, and thereby drawing Vietnamese producers, investors and customers toward the hotel and away from Chinese institutions.

According to this interpretation, the social centers should be understood as forms of institutional linkage, rather than as isolated profit-making enterprises or secret revolutionary command centers. Other services offered by the hotel corroborate such an interpretation. For example, on February 26th the hotel posted a note announcing that registration had opened for a course in bookkeeping. The class cost 4 piasters per month.⁴²² On May 21st, *Six Provinces News* posted an advertisement offering consignment services: "Any gentleman travelling from the provinces to Saigon to sell rice, coconuts, pepper, or maize and who wants information on prices or who needs somebody to sell it for him, or oversee measuring to ensure against fraudsters, come to South Central Hotel and talk to Gilbert Chiếu."⁴²³

Furthermore, both South Central Hotel and Enlightened Renewal Hotel of Mỹ Tho played a role in the development of Vietnamese Reform Opera- hosting some of the first performances. Gilbert Chiếu advertised one such performance in the following way: "I therefore invite you ladies and gentlemen, to spend your leisure time with us, above all to acquaint yourselves with our shop, but also to enjoy the *đờn tài tử*, to witness the flourishing of commerce, and aid one another in great achievements [*công thành danh toại*]."⁴²⁴ While of obvious importance for the history of

⁴¹⁹ LTTV 4, 5 Dec. 1907 Sơn Nam, *Phong trào Duy Tân ở Bắc, Trung, Nam*, 190.

⁴²⁰ Sơn Nam, *Phong trào Duy Tân ở Bắc, Trung, Nam*, 188.

⁴²¹ There is cause to speculate that Chiếu is here attempting to encroach on another business dominated by Chinese migrants. For example, *Figures and folkways of the South* praises Chợ Lớn Chinese ceremonial extravagance and even singles out specific Chinese funeral service providers as especially important local notables. Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Nam kỳ Phong tục Nhơn vật Diển ca Chủ thích*, 218.

⁴²² LTTV 19, 26 Feb. 1908. Sơn Nam, *Phong trào Duy Tân ở Bắc, Trung, Nam*, 190–91.

⁴²³ LTTV 27, 21 May, 1908.

⁴²⁴ Though they overlook the Minh Tân connections, a useful account of the parallel development of these music forms and their relation to colonial expositions and business leaders like Lương Khắc Ninh can be found in. Nguyễn

tài tử and *cải lương*, for the present argument, what matters is that the hotels hosted them to construct Vietnamese venues of sociality directed at rural businessmen visiting the city. Seen through these advertisements, South Central Hotel appears as a capital-poor entrepreneur's attempt to construct the kinds of Vietnamese commercial networks that could undergird the nascent bloc's political power.

Enlightened Renewal Hotel [Minh Tân Khách Sạn] - Mỹ Tho

The Enlightened Renewal Hotel of Mỹ Tho also predated *Six Provinces News*; its charter was posted in *Talking Business* on October 10th, 1907. Like South Central Hotel in Saigon, Gilbert Chiêu saw the hotel as both a business venture and as a meeting place where Vietnamese could build social and commercial connections.

Now that South Central Hotel has opened, I'm shifting to Enlightened Renewal Hotel Mỹ Tho. I ask you, Gentlemen of Enlightened Renewal, to look favorably on this enterprise and invest with me so that we may share in one another's joy, and profit together from a shared enterprise, to have a place for golden friendship [*kim bằng*], that we may first exchange pleasantries [*thù tạc vẫn lai*], and second move to helping our countrymen set foot on the road to civilization and rapid progress.⁴²⁵

This hotel had deeper roots in the contributions of Orchard Heartland elites. Whereas South Central Hotel left little trace after Gilbert Chiêu's arrest, a handful of figures associated with Enlightened Renewal Hotel can more easily be tracked, revealing elite institutional continuity across subsequent political upheavals. For example, historian Sơn Nam claims that Gilbert Chiêu purchased this hotel from Chinese literary translator and *Talking Business* journalist Nguyễn Chánh Sắt, who had previously owned it under the name Hotel of Cochinchina.⁴²⁶ Nguyễn Chánh Sắt later went on to serve as the activist chief-editor of *Talking Business* during the anti-Chinese boycotts of 1919. Furthermore, the land was owned by Huỳnh Đình Điền, an interpreter from Gò Công who, at the turn of the century, had been dispatched to work for the Resident of Annam in Hội An and then Phan Thiết.⁴²⁷ The Huỳnh Đình were a wealthy clan of canton chiefs whose marriage networks stretched into Mỹ Tho.⁴²⁸ Điền returned to Cochinchina and joined forces with Gilbert Chiêu, becoming a founding investor of the Enlightened Renewal Industrial Corporation. In August of 1908—at a time when rumors circulated in the press that Gilbert Chiêu was under investigation for political crimes and investors were withdrawing from his operations—Điền proved his ideological commitment to the movement by taking over direct management of the hotel, a risky maneuver.

His affiliation with Gilbert Chiêu, by then a notorious political criminal, had no discernable repercussions for Huỳnh Đình Điền's political or business career. From at least 1911, Huỳnh

Lê Tuyên and Nguyễn Đức Hiệp, *Hát Bội, Đờn ca Tài Tử và Cải Lương Cuối Tk 19 Đầu Tk 20* (Nhà xuất bản Văn hoá - Văn nghệ, 2013); Sơn Nam, *Phong trào Duy Tân ở Bắc, Trung, Nam*, 191.

⁴²⁵ NCMD 311, 8 Oct. 1907. Phạm Long Điền, "Vai Trò Của Nông Cỗ Mìn Đâm Trong Phong Trào Duy Tân Miền Nam," 27.

⁴²⁶ Phạm Phúc Vĩnh agrees and adds that the hotel was referred to as either *Nam kỳ khách sạn* or *Nam Kỳ lễ độ*. Neither provide a citation. Sơn Nam, *Phong trào Duy Tân ở Bắc, Trung, Nam*, 191; Phạm Phúc Vĩnh, *Phong trào Minh Tân ở Nam Kỳ*.

⁴²⁷ *Bulletin officiel de l'Indochine française*, September 1, 1901, 1,821; *Bulletin administratif de l'Annam*, January 1, 1902, 116.

⁴²⁸ See entries number 45, 113, and 166 in Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Điều Cổ Hạ Kim Thi Tập*.

Đình Diễm was a member of the mixed race gentlemanly scholarly organization the *Société des études indochinoises*, where he was listed as *commerçant* in Mỹ Tho.⁴²⁹ He was also a founding figure in the Vietnamese *sociétés de enseignement mutuels*—civic organizations that formed the substrate of the Constitutionalist Party.⁴³⁰ In 1919, during the next cycle of anti-Chinese pro-business mobilization, he was invited to speak at the inauguration of Nguyễn Phú Khai's *Cochinchina Economic Congress*, where he testified as a veteran witness to the long term struggle for the formation of a Vietnamese capitalist class.⁴³¹ He was treasurer for the committee organizing the funeral of Phan Châu Trinh in 1926, putting him again in the crosshairs of the colonial police.⁴³² Like Đặng Thúc Liêng and other Orchard Heartland elites of the era, Diễm's career uncomfortably straddles collaborationist and “anti-colonial” organizations in a way that demonstrates the insufficiency of these categories.

In addition to providing normal hospitality services, Enlightened Renewal Hotel Mỹ Tho also aimed to become a regional hub for Vietnamese social and business activity. It served as a retailer for locally produced “Enlightened Renewal” products and it hosted concerts. “We sell quality tea, Phu Quoc fish sauce by the bottle, matts, wax, soap, and other goods. Each evening from 5pm to 10pm there are *tài tử ca xang* performances...”⁴³³ The hotel also served as a site of legal services, with Vietnamese lawyer JB Xuân offering counsel for “anybody that has suffered an injustice” if they send a letter detailing their issue to the hotel.⁴³⁴ The hotel also served as political forum for electoral debate. When the Mỏ Cày landowner Bùi Quang Trứ announced his candidacy for the Colonial Council to represent the Orchard Heartlands electoral district encompassing Mỹ Tho, Bến Tre and Tân An, he invited his rivals Bình and Cương to a debate at the hotel, where they would “give speeches to the electoral delegates so that they might determine who most deserving of their votes”.⁴³⁵ The two hotels functioned as public civic institutions, not stopovers for surreptitious anticolonial politics dressed up as business.

⁴²⁹ I was unable to consult earlier membership lists. *Bulletin de la Société des études indochinoises*, No. 61, 1911, 127.

⁴³⁰ See chapter ten.

⁴³¹ See the account in “Nam-kỳ kinh tế hội,” *Công luận báo*, no. 269, November 14, 1919.

⁴³² Luckily, samples of some of the contributions addressed to him are available online. [Sans titre]- Copie d'une lettre en vietnamien adressée à Huỳnh Đình Diễm à propos des funérailles de Phan Châu Trinh. Université Côte d'Azur. BU Lettres Arts Sciences Humaines. Fonds ASEMI. COTE. PH37, ark:/17103/cq0k; His role was controversial and deserves fuller treatment, for an example of the recriminations see “Les mensonges du ‘Progrès Annamite’: le témoignage de M. Phan-Van-Truong. Lettre ouverte au docteur Ng.-van-Thinh, Saigon.” *La Tribune Indochinois*, No. 25, October 4, 1926, 4.; Later French police investigations appear to have escalated from these intra Vietnamese press recriminations, see: “Les 100.000 piastres de Phan-chau-Trinh”, *La Tribune Indochinois*, No. 318, September 28, 1928, 1.

⁴³³ *LTTV* 46, October 4, 1908, Sơn Nam, *Phong trào Duy Tân ở Bắc, Trung, Nam*, 193.

⁴³⁴ *LTTV* 18, March 19, 1908, \Sơn Nam, *Phong trào Duy Tân ở Bắc, Trung, Nam*, 192.

⁴³⁵ Đốc phủ Bình is probably Phan Tân Bình, Diệp Văn Cương was a longstanding member of the council who had pushed Lương Khắc Ninh out in 1904. It's unclear whether Bùi Quang Trứ is related to Constitutionalist Party founder Bùi Quang Chiêu, they are both from the same district of Bến Tre, but Trứ isn't listed as a relative in *Verses of Homage*. Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Điều Cỗ Hạ Kim Thi Tập*, 163. The challenge appears in “diễn thuyết cho chư vị thừa sai Mỹ tho nghị ai phải ai quấy mới gọi trắng công cừ”. *LTTV* 20, April 2 1908, Sơn Nam, *Phong trào Duy Tân ở Bắc, Trung, Nam*, 192–93. It's unclear whether the debate ever took place, but Trứ was so soundly defeated in that election that nearly 30 years later it was joked his nickname “Nhut-Tri” came from him receiving only a single vote—the one he cast himself. “Succinctement”, *Le Populaire d'Indochine*, September 21, 1935.

For Vietnamese [Chiêu Nam Lầu] – Saigon Hotel and Restaurant

A final social center has a less clear relation to the movement as a whole but nonetheless deserves mention since it was founded by Gilbert Chiêu's lieutenant, Nguyễn An Khương, and has gained an unearned reputation in secondary scholarship as a central Minh Tân Movement institution. For example, Hue-Tam Ho Tai's *Radicalism and the Vietnamese Revolution*, the standard study of Vietnamese revolutionary thought in the interwar South, gives the restaurant significant credit for the moral development Nguyễn An Khương's son, the revolutionary Nguyễn An Ninh, by emphasizing the restaurant's centrality to the Eastern Study Movement and proximity to Phan Bội Châu. I quote the passage at length below as an example of the orthodox historiography's excessive focus on anti-colonial elements which obscured the business logic so prominent in the movement's own literature.

Ninh was born on 6 September 1900 in a suburb of Saigon. His father, Nguyen An Khuong, was a middling landowner who preferred to think of himself as a country scholar. He was a prolific translator of Chinese historical novels, for which, in the absence of genuine Vietnamese fiction, there was a strong demand in the South. When the Reform Movement was launched, Nguyen An Khuong supported it enthusiastically. He opened a hotel to serve as a meeting place for patriotic conspirators and for students on their way abroad. The Chieu Nam hotel also functioned as a center for collecting funds raised in the provinces on behalf of Phan Boi Chau, and for distributing anticolonial propaganda. Khuong's sister managed it while also overseeing her nephew's education (Nguyen An Ninh's mother is never mentioned, raising the possibility that she died in childbirth). This arrangement freed Nguyen An Khuong to act as business manager for *News from the Six Provinces*, a Vietnamese-language paper which managed to disseminate anticolonial propaganda until the Surete managed to infiltrate the Eastern Travel Movement and uncovered its southern infrastructure. Another aunt was also active in anticolonial politics. The widow of a French freemason, she escorted Prince Cuong De on his trip through the South in 1913, bringing along her half-French son to underscore her French connections and avoid awkward questions from the police during the trip. Ninh's paternal uncle, Nguyen An Cu, a much-traveled practitioner of traditional medicine, also had wide connections in the anticolonial underground. Nguyen An Ninh was thus raised in an intensely patriotic atmosphere.⁴³⁶

The previous chapter argued that historians have overstated the anticolonial content of *Six Provinces News*. Here I only note that the historiography's anticolonial framing has distracted from more prominent ideological features. Exilic connections deserve treatment but inflating them produces a one-sided account. In the case of Nguyễn An Khương's restaurant, little evidence supports the claim that it served as a hub for business and social services on par with South Central and Enlightened Renewal Hotels. Even so, it resembled other institutions in the Minh Tân movement in the public, forceful anti-Chinese case that Khương made for it. When Nguyễn An Khương first advertised the restaurant and wine bar [*bao biện tửu tịch*], he did so as part of a campaign against Chinese dominance of the industry:

These days our wealthy countrymen look down upon restaurateurs. No one is willing to compete with the Qing foreigners and serve our countrymen. Instead, we let the

⁴³⁶ Tai, *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution*, 74.

Chinamen [*ba chủ chệt*] monopolize the profits and power. Worse still, they murmur inscrutably about us [*ăn nói xi xô xi xào*], they don't know how to treat a gentleman [*chiêu hiền đãi sĩ*], nor do they distinguish between greater or lesser men [*chẳng kiêng lớn nhỏ sang hèn chi cả*]. Us Annamese are so vain and afraid of being called a 'rice hawker' that we suffer the Qing foreigners lording over us. We hate the disrespectful treatment [*ăn nói hỗn hào*] we've received from the Chinamen, and we want to totally avoid their restaurants. But whenever some duty brings us up to Saigon, we can't escape them because they own all the restaurants in the city. Your only other option is to be hosted by an acquaintance, and to be hosted is to be personally indebted. [...] I've decided to wash away our shame, to put aside our vanity, to become a rice hawker and establish a restaurant on 49 Boulevard Charner right next to the market. The shop is called *Chiêu Nam Lầu*--meaning a shop for Vietnamese.⁴³⁷

The business occupied three stories. The ground floor sold rice and soup in the "Vietnamese and Chinese fashion." The second floor specialized in finer dining and, for breakfast, "various sorts of cakes," also in the Vietnamese and Chinese fashion, and prepared by a "talented Qing chief". The third floor contained hotel rooms which, owing to their height and position on a main boulevard, were "open and breezy." Nguyễn An Khương cautioned his customers to expect a nationalist price premium. "Don't think that you can always avoid spending money," he wrote, "spending money that helps your countrymen in their achievements keeps the money in our country, isn't that more useful than handing it to them so they can bring it to China and buy land and a house?" From the above, one might add to Hue-Tam Ho Tai's characterization that the "intensely patriotic atmosphere" which nourished the eight year old Nguyễn An Ninh was also intensely anti-Chinese.

Autonomous enterprises and grassroots geography

Autonomous grassroots organizing surrounded the core institutions as they took shape. Gilbert Chiếu used *Six Provinces News* to cheer on local gentry initiatives and to chart the progress of local business efforts across the territory. The period was marked by an effervescent gentry excitement. Readers were optimistic that "the 1900s will be the century that sees us contend for our share of the profits and bring the hoped for civilizational flourishing to the twenty-one provinces of Cochinchina."⁴³⁸ In this lively atmosphere, Enlightened Renewal became a slogan that drew otherwise isolated firms into a common campaign of national strengthening and mutual trust. The Vietnamese historian Sơn Nam identifies eighteen enterprises through advertisements, customer reviews, or endorsements from Gilbert Chiếu himself. Some cases border on the fantastic, while others may have preexisted the movement, latching onto its slogans to reach new clientele. Some firms offered ownership stakes and published information about market capitalization, but most appeared with only the sparsest information. Fragmentary information and the opacity of Sơn Nam's sampling strategy make a comprehensive account of these initiatives impossible. However, sufficient information exists to sketch a crude portrait of the grassroots initiatives that reveals the types of figures it attracted, the types of enterprises it launched and their geographic distribution.

⁴³⁷ Sơn Nam, *Phong trào Duy Tân ở Bắc, Trung, Nam*, 201–3. Boulevard Charner is now Nguyễn Huệ.

⁴³⁸ Sơn Nam, *Phong trào Duy Tân ở Bắc, Trung, Nam*, 212.

Unsurprisingly, most of the entrepreneurs were Orchard Heartland notables holding local rural or provincial electoral offices. For example, *Enlightened Renewal Commercial Enterprise* [*Minh Tân Thương Cuộc*], a planned retail shop in western Tân An Province, was founded by three village notables from An Tập village: a retired village chief, a retired village teacher, and a retired mayor.⁴³⁹ Or take for example the market and traditional medicine retailer called the *Southern Beauty Prosperity Commercial House* [*Nam Mỹ Thạnh Thương Quán*] founded in Ba Kè market town in Vĩnh Long Province. Five men founded it: a provincial councilor and four retired village chiefs from three villages spread across two cantons.⁴⁴⁰ In the first case, the village council itself presumably provided the organizational matrix which brought the partners together. In the second case, the founding investors were retired village notables spread across different cantons and a provincial councilor, so the French provincial administration may have first brought them together.

Several of the other enterprises confirm the colonial administration's role. For example, Southern Harmony [*Nam Hoà*], a rice purchasing and milling cooperative in the provincial capital of Bến Tre was founded by “clerks from the courts and governor’s office” [*hai ty phan niết*].⁴⁴¹ Two high officials, prefects [*tri phủ*] from Bạc Liêu and Mỹ Tho, founded a shipping company in Đại Ngãi.⁴⁴² A Chợ Lớn restaurant named Southern Benefit [*Nam Lợi*] was founded by “village officials and councilmen.”⁴⁴³ Southern Harmonious Prosperity [*Nam Hoà Thạnh*], a successful retailer in Biên Hoà which Gilbert Chiếu personally held up for emulation, was “established by clerks in the ministries and who partnered with provincial councilors and canton and deputy canton chiefs”.⁴⁴⁴

Biên Hoà is nestled in the foothills on the far eastern side of the Gia Định Plateau, and was a major producer of lumber, stone and concrete. When Gilbert Chiếu made a trip to source materials for the construction of Enlightened Renewal Industrial Corporation’s kiln, he sent a telegraph back to other investors extolling Southern Harmonious Prosperity. “This company is sure to succeed,” he wrote, “because the canton chiefs and village notables have invested, thus the people will no longer purchase from the Chinese. Our Annamese mentality is such that we are terrified unless the yamen [*nha môn*] leads the way, then everyone will invest. That explains why Bà Rịa and Biên Hoà, though poorer than the other provinces, are a pioneering example.”⁴⁴⁵ Yamen is a Chinese term for the district officialdom under the old regime. By using the term, Gilbert Chiếu acknowledges that local rural officials were the Minh Tân Movement’s key constituency.

The repetition of terms such as south [*nam*] (a metonym for Vietnamese), harmony [*hoà*], benefit [*lợi*], and prosperity [*thạnh*] in company names testifies to the entrepreneurs’ belief that they were leading a movement for national solidarity and flourishing. While little information is available about the motivations of each founder, there are clues that the entrepreneurs were responding to Lương Khắc Ninh and Gilbert Chiếu’s propaganda. For example, the description of a project for a Bạc Liêu shipping company echoed themes of shame over national

⁴³⁹ Sơn Nam, *Phong trào Duy Tân ở Bắc, Trung, Nam*, 208.

⁴⁴⁰ Sơn Nam, *Phong trào Duy Tân ở Bắc, Trung, Nam*, 209.

⁴⁴¹ Sơn Nam, *Phong trào Duy Tân ở Bắc, Trung, Nam*, 210.

⁴⁴² Sơn Nam, *Phong trào Duy Tân ở Bắc, Trung, Nam*, 211.

⁴⁴³ Sơn Nam, *Phong trào Duy Tân ở Bắc, Trung, Nam*, 212.

⁴⁴⁴ Sơn Nam, *Phong trào Duy Tân ở Bắc, Trung, Nam*, 213.

⁴⁴⁵ Sơn Nam, *Phong trào Duy Tân ở Bắc, Trung, Nam*, 213.

backwardness: “tears fall whenever I glance upon the Annamese people,” the notice began, “because foreigners trample us like chaff, mock us without hesitation, and treat us like wild dogs.”⁴⁴⁶ Expressions of shame were paired with calls for “contributing to the flourishing of civilization”.⁴⁴⁷ In at least one case, Gilbert Chiếu’s propaganda caused a quasi-religious experience. Before founding Southern Victory [*Khải Nam*], Dương Văn Hữu from Chợ Giữa, Vĩnh Kim Đông village between Mỹ Tho and Cái Bè, was “a debauched playboy. With neither inheritance nor trade, he would wander the village, baton in hand, smoking Bastos.” The baton and Bastos give us the image of a local authority figure with sufficient means to enjoy expensive French cigarettes, but without productive enterprise.

Then in January he saw *Six Provinces News* for the first time, and reading the many articles that encouraged our countrymen to invest together to make profits, as well as words of advice to avoid wasteful habits. Dương Văn Hữu repented of his previous ways and concerned himself with the future, with reform, with shunning evil and treasuring righteousness [...] he invested his household savings, 2,000 piasters, and established a shop in Chợ Giữa called Southern Victory, selling miscellaneous goods and French alcohol...⁴⁴⁸

Enterprises expressed wide variation in their stated ambitions. Some proposals verged on fantasy, for example one man in Bảo Định, Mỹ Tho proposed that three million “well to do” men of the south each invest one piaster to establish an import and retail cooperative that would establish a branch in all 253 market towns of Cochinchina. The proceeds would then be devoted to purchasing a rice mill and “choosing the brightest Cochinese and sending them to France [Tây] to study science”.⁴⁴⁹ Other proposals had extremely modest objectives, casting doubt on their connections to the broader movement. For instance the *Société de secours mutuels des instituteurs et professeurs de caractères chinois en Cochinchine* appears to have been a mutual aid society for teachers in Gò Công which promised to help cover member’s medical and funerary expenses, with no call toward entrepreneurship in commercial struggle with interloping Indians and Chinese.⁴⁵⁰ Southern Benefit restaurant in Chợ Lớn, meanwhile, seems little more than a failing Vietnamese restaurant hoping to rebrand itself as a marketing ploy.⁴⁵¹ While these examples

The grassroots enterprises provide two models exemplifying successful Enlightened Renewal. The first takes the form of retail shops, and is described in a letter submitted by a retired village magistrate [*cửu hương chánh*] from Châu Đốc, who described Bến Tre Market as a flourishing space of Vietnamese business.⁴⁵² There were 8 Vietnamese owned shops running along the river, including: an eastern medicine shop; a lamp oil retailer owned by colonial councilman Cương that accepted rice as payment; a shop selling imported Chinese, Japanese and European goods; Bùi Quang Nho’s successful office supply shop; a shop and restaurant specializing in Western alcohol and cuisine; a textile and soap retailer that doubled as a barber; a shop founded by local

⁴⁴⁶ Sơn Nam, *Phong trào Duy Tân ở Bắc, Trung, Nam*, 211.

⁴⁴⁷ Sơn Nam, *Phong trào Duy Tân ở Bắc, Trung, Nam*, 215.

⁴⁴⁸ Sầm Giang Đặng Bá Dung, “Khử tà qui chánh”, *LTTV* 47; Sơn Nam, *Phong trào Duy Tân ở Bắc, Trung, Nam*, 216.

⁴⁴⁹ Sơn Nam, *Phong trào Duy Tân ở Bắc, Trung, Nam*, 209.

⁴⁵⁰ Sơn Nam, *Phong trào Duy Tân ở Bắc, Trung, Nam*, 207–8.

⁴⁵¹ Sơn Nam, *Phong trào Duy Tân ở Bắc, Trung, Nam*, 212.

⁴⁵² Sơn Nam, *Phong trào Duy Tân ở Bắc, Trung, Nam*, 218.

teachers that specialized in glassware, as well as imported Siamese and Vietnamese goods from the Central and Northern regions; and a shop selling crafts and decorative arts, such as carving and inlays. The author compared the street favorably to Hanoi suggesting that, Tonkinese industriousness remained a model for the Cochinchinese gentry. “A few years ago, I went on a business trip to Hanoi where I witnessed Annamese engaged in commerce, and now I come to Bến Tre Market and even though it isn’t so large, there are many Vietnamese shops.” In this modest vision, retired Vietnamese officials have replaced foreign migrants as shop keepers in the market towns of the interior.

This peri-urban vision of Enlightened Renewal from the Orchard Heartland shared the stage with a hacienda-like mode of success envisaged by the large landowners of the western provinces and exemplified by Lâm Quang Thời.⁴⁵³ According to an account published in *Six Provinces News*, Thời’s storehouse was estimated to hold two hundred thousand *giạ*, or eight thousand cubic meters of paddy. He had “four or five” of his own river freighters [*ghe chài*] which he used to carry rice directly to Chợ Lớn, as well as more than ten sampans with which he purchased paddy from neighboring farms. “Such a talented and wealthy man, so wise in commerce, that he has established over a half dozen warehouses. Watching him work so naturally, he doesn’t yield one bit before the Chinese [*Si-na*]! Each day his workers scurry to and fro, there are dozens of them. At first glance [his estate] didn’t seem like the countryside at all but rather resembled a bustling city!”⁴⁵⁴

Three salient features stand out from the analysis of the grassroots initiatives. First, autonomous initiatives drew overwhelmingly on local rural officialdom whose administrative networks supplied the matrix for collective investment. Second, their company names and founding manifestos showed the grassroots uptake of the movement’s key ideas. They saw commerce as the key to national flourishing, and they fused economic ambition with a moral vocabulary of shame, solidarity, and renewal. Third, despite positive signs, the grassroots initiatives showed the movement’s limits. Entrepreneurs found two distinct images of success, both of which fell far short of the big business program first sketched by Lương Khắc Ninh. Either they clustered in small retail establishments in the provincial towns, or, like Lâm Quang Thời’s estate, they consolidated land, transport, and labor in capitalist agriculture. The first vision belonged to the Orchard Heartland gentry whose initiative this chapter has tracked. The second would come into its own only later, as the western provinces overtook the central delta in the decades after 1910. Neither posed a realistic threat to Chinese control over the rice trade.

Business types and spatial distribution

Lâm Quang Thời’s operation employed a small town’s-worth of tenant farmers and laborers. Complete with privately built roads, canals and schools, it provided an alternate anti-Chinese business strategy. Whereas the shopkeepers sought to eliminate the Chinese from urban consumer markets, Thời’s hacienda built up supply-side Vietnamese economic power through Vietnamese ownership of the transportation and warehousing network. He hoped this plan might

⁴⁵³ Lâm Quang Thời is grandfather to later Army of Republic of Vietnam General Lâm Quang Phước and great grandfather to Vietnamese American writer Andrew Lam. He is also discussed in chapter four.

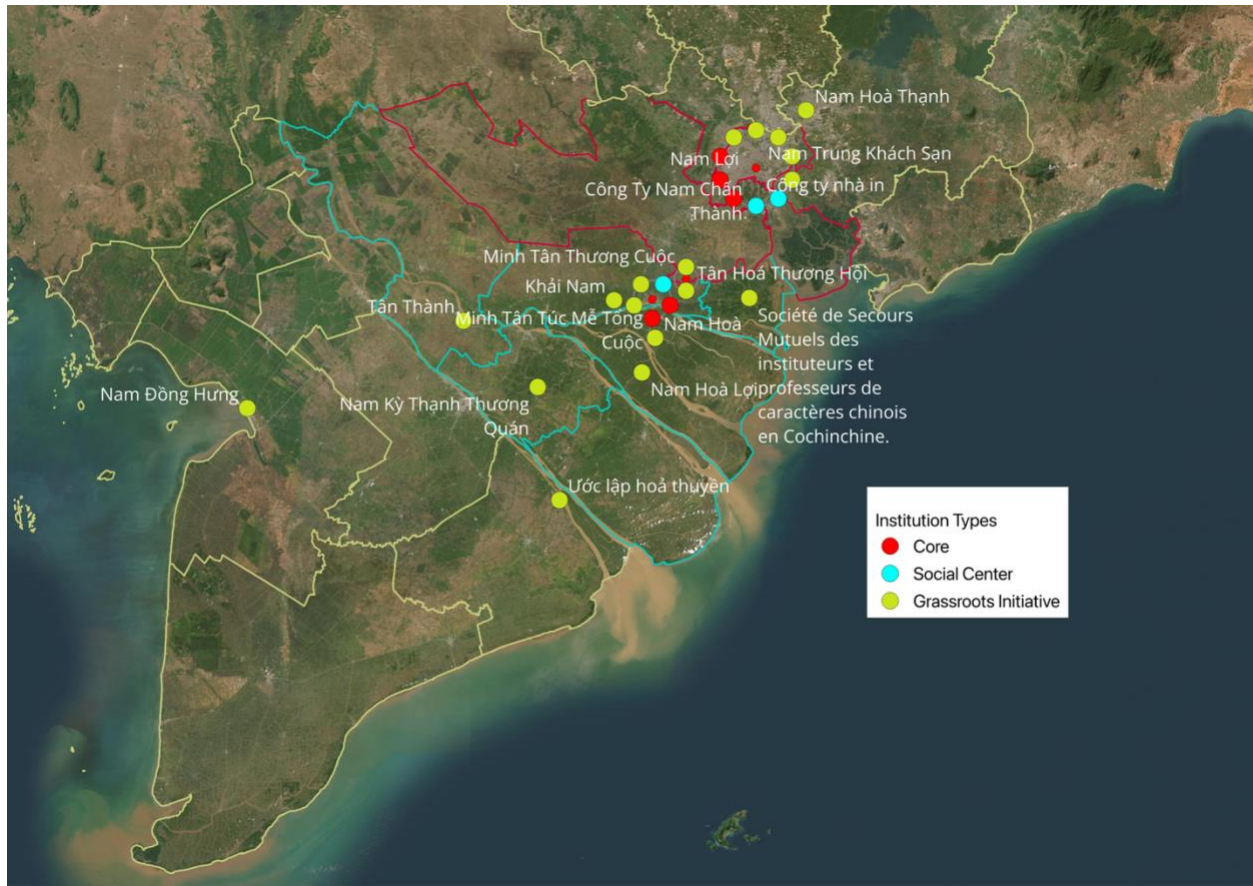
⁴⁵⁴ Sơn Nam interviewed Nguyễn Thị Thịnh, daughter of Minh Tân journalist and activist Nguyễn Viên Kiêu (a central figure in the previously discussed religion debate), reports the Lâm Quang family allowed Kiêu to sublease their land at favorable terms as an indirect funding mechanism for the Đông Du Movement. Sơn Nam, *Phong trào Duy Tân ở Bắc, Trung, Nam*, 220.

circumvent the vertically integrated Chinese credit, retail, and rice purchasing industry that dominated the interior. Large estates like Thòi eclipsed the Orchard Heartland in importance, as vast tracts of land were drained, brought under cultivation and consolidated over the course of the next two decades.⁴⁵⁵ But during the first decade of the twentieth century the Vietnamese elite center of gravity was still situated in the central delta provinces around the Tiền River, a fact confirmed by the profiles and spatial distribution of grassroots business mobilization for Enlightened Renewal.

Autonomous initiative sector	Count
Retail- Hospitality	12
Rice Trade	3
Other	3
Grand Total	18

The eighteen autonomous initiatives mobilized through *Six Provinces News* can be grouped into three broad types. Retail-Hospitality initiatives include shops selling consumer and imported luxury goods, as well as restaurants and hotels. Oftentimes hotels featured restaurants and shops. As the above table shows, two thirds of the businesses fell into this category. The second category, accounting for one sixth of the businesses were industries in the manufacturing and transportation sectors, all centering on the rice trade, including a steamship company, a rice purchasing and milling company, and a planned import export company. A third miscellaneous category included a mutual aid society for demotic script teachers, a small pawn shop and credit company, and a last company whose products are unclear. The numbers show that, even when accounting for proposals for future companies, two-thirds remained small or medium shops run by retirees and located in the urban centers of provincial towns.

⁴⁵⁵ Brocheux, “Grands Propriétaires et Fermiers Dans l’ouest de La Cochinchine Pendant La Période Coloniale.”



The above map displays geographic and industry information for the twenty-six movement related organizations discussed thus far.⁴⁵⁶ Green dots represent small shops, mostly involved in retail as well as some small craft manufactures such as jewelers or tailors. Red dots represent the core institutions. In the west, they included the capital-intensive production and transportation enterprises such as the rice trust and the industrial corporation. In Saigon, they included the newspapers, *Talking Business* and *Six Provinces News*, and the separate publishing house. Blue dots represent social centers – the Enlightened Renewal Hotel in Mỹ Tho, South Central Hotel in Saigon, and For Vietnamese restaurant, also in Saigon. To avoid muddling the visualization, businesses which clustered close together in major cities are distributed around their center, represented by a small red point.

The map clarifies three important features of the movement. First, social centers concentrate in Saigon, plus one in Mỹ Tho. Second, the large industrial and commercial enterprises concentrate in the Orchard Heartland, and particularly in Mỹ Tho. Third, most enterprises were small shops. Taking the Vaico River as the dividing line, the map shows eleven movement organizations on the Gia Định Plateau and the remaining fifteen in the Delta. This number greatly underestimates

⁴⁵⁶ Unfortunately, due to an inability to obtain complete runs of *Six Provinces News* and *Talking Business* for the crucial 1907-1909 period, I have been forced to rely on mid-century South Vietnamese historians who had access to these materials. Since the sampling strategies pursued by these historians is opaque and unverifiable, I have at best recreated an incomplete snapshot of the movement as filtered through to posterity by chance and biases. Despite these qualifications, this incomplete picture represents a significant advance in our knowledge.

the movement's basis in the Delta, since 5 of the 11 are Gilbert Chiêu and Nguyễn An Khương's printing and hotel operations, which chiefly catered to Delta readers and customers. Discounting the core institutions and counting only the grassroots efforts pioneered by the readership, six are on the plateau and thirteen in the Delta, showing a similar bias toward the Delta as chapter three found characterizing the elite more generally. Taken together, the sectoral breakdown and the map show that the movement's grassroots base was overwhelmingly made of small retail and hospitality shops run by provincial notables and retirees, not stable of capital-intensive ventures. The few large enterprises that did emerge clustered in the Orchard Heartland around Mỹ Tho, while the social centers anchored Saigon.

Decoding the movement: tín 信 and the political logic of linkages

The preceding details give a fuller picture of Minh Tân's institutional infrastructure. Most scholars assume that the hotels acted as conduits for sending Go East students to Japan and propagandizing Phan Bội Châu's thought among the Cochinchinese elite.⁴⁵⁷ But the putschist fantasies pursued by a small subset of the movement's participants has distracted from the strategic logic governing the business movement.

The Minh Tân Movement was fundamentally developmentalist in orientation. As a political program, it sought to establish the leadership of Orchard Heartland elites, who would tackle Vietnamese backwardness by confronting the Chinese. Albert Hirschman's concept of linkage effects clarifies the dynamic at play.⁴⁵⁸ According to this framework, development arises from growth imbalances wherein certain industries thrive thereby stimulating growth in upstream producers of its inputs— what he calls backwards linkages; and creating inputs for new downstream enterprises -- what he calls forward linkages. These “production linkages” are one part of the picture. Alongside production linkages are “consumption linkages,”: the process by which income earned from staple production creates demand that can either stimulate domestic industry or, if spent on imports, drain demand abroad. Critically, consumption linkages can be harmful. During export expansion, established handicraft and artisan activities are destroyed as labor is pulled into staple production and imported consumer goods outcompete domestic manufactures. This is the dynamic familiar from dependency theory-based accounts which have shaped analysis of Vietnamese dynamics. However, contrary to “underdevelopment” or “world systems” approaches, which tend to treat certain outcomes as inhering in peripheral economies, Hirschman's framework treats them as contingent on the institutional arrangements governing production and exchange. The same staple, under different institutional conditions, can proliferate or destroy linkages. The question is what constellation of institutions surrounds the staple and who controls them.

⁴⁵⁷ The most in-depth treatment of these cells is Bao La Cư Sĩ, *Văn Hoá Nguyệt San* 52. July 1960, 702. Bao La Cư Sĩ was the pen name of Republic of Vietnam official and academic Thái Văn Kiểm, see: Tan Nguyen, “Học Giả Thái Văn Kiểm qua Đời, Thọ 93 Tuổi,” *Nguoi Viet Online*, February 28, 2015, <https://www.nguoi-viet.com/little-saigon/Hoc-gia-Thai-Van-Kiem-qua-doi-tho-93-tuoi-0242/>. His account of the Go East cells was in turn cited in Sơn Nam, *Phong trào Duy Tân ở Bắc, Trung, Nam*, 191. From Sơn Nam it entered into much of the later Vietnamese language scholarship. Bao La Cư Sĩ didn't cite all his claims, whereas some appear to have been drawn from testimony, in many ways the source is essentially similar to the other midcentury Vietnamese sources discussed in the next chapter, which feature mistranslated Vietnamese titles and was probably drawn from colonial police reports. This argument is developed in chapter eight.

⁴⁵⁸ Albert O. Hirschman, *The Strategy of Economic Development* (Yale University Press, 1958); and especially: “A Generalized Linkage Approach to Development, with Special Reference to Staples.”

The conditions prevailing in Cochinchina were a case in point. Monocrop export rice agriculture predominated in this region, but transportation and processing were capital intensive and technically unfamiliar. Moreover, Chinese controlled the milling and river transportation sectors, while French dominated the large import-export and financial institutions. Foreign dominance posed a powerful obstacle to the creation of linkages among Vietnamese because key industries transacted within foreign economic enclaves, and Chinese and French firms repatriated savings abroad. The Minh Tân Movement was a linkage movement. It identified the solution to underdevelopment in the lack of industrial enterprises. But it also identified — more perceptively — the lack of linkage effects arising from benefits to suppliers and clients of the core industries. The striking mix of admiration and resentment that filled Cochinchinese accounts of Chinese and Indian commercial domination shouldn't distract from the legitimate diagnosis shaping the Minh Tan's strategy.

The diagnosis is easy to miss because movement activists expressed the strategic logic in their own idiom. From Lương Khắc Ninh's first formulations in *Talking Business* in 1901, the gentry explained their backwardness through an indictment of mistrust: a violation of one of the five supreme Confucian virtues, tín 信, or trustworthiness. Though vague and moralizing in comparison to the more elaborate social-theoretical apparatus used by a subsequent generation of Marxists, this view shouldn't be dismissed.⁴⁵⁹ The movement's institutional strategy expressed a coherent diagnosis and strategic vision: the need to construct the kinds of institutions which would reduce the comparatively high transaction costs borne by Vietnamese businesses, flatten the information asymmetries between Vietnamese and Chinese, and develop institutional connections between Vietnamese elites.

Rural Vietnamese businessmen suffered a higher cost of market intelligence and likewise lacked neutral spaces to conduct negotiations and standardize practices. Whereas Chinese purchasers who travelled to the countryside were horizontally and vertically integrated and thus able to charge monopoly prices, Vietnamese who brought their products to urban markets to circumvent these brokers bore significant risks and were forced to negotiate from a position of extreme weakness. They lacked a neutral local venue from which to base their operations and were forced to stay at shoddy Chinese-owned hotels or to board with a local Vietnamese friend. They had no warehousing of their own, and no advance knowledge of prices.

In addition to price information imbalances between Vietnamese and Chinese, Vietnamese transactions faced difficulties coordinating timing and an unfamiliarity with legal documentation and licensing. We've already mentioned the attorney J.B Xuân advertising his services at the Mỹ Tho location in *Six Provinces News*, presumably he was not the only Vietnamese lawyer connected to the broader network of bureaucrats and businessmen who attended the hotel functions. By providing a venue where Vietnamese businessmen could congregate, the hotels connected rural to urban networks, providing a hub for the exchange of knowhow and the standardization of practices. While there was at least one formal class in bookkeeping techniques offered at the Saigon location, formal classes were not the only means of coordination. Collaboration and rivalry between Vietnamese businessmen would encourage the dissemination of best practices throughout the network, as successful figures rose as models of emulation. The

⁴⁵⁹ Pace David G. Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945* (University of California Press, 1984).

institutions' social networking fostered reputational systems that sanctioned swindling and built confidence in Vietnamese-owned industry.

It falls to economists to determine which of the above factors, or whatever additional factors I've failed to appreciate, were most decisive in fostering Vietnamese commercial inferiority. My more modest goal is to propose a plausible interpretation for the specific vocabulary employed in the near decade-long litany of Cochinchinese Vietnamese elite complaints, which constantly paired immigrant resentment with a denunciation of Vietnamese distrust and dishonesty. I propose this was a form of intellectual enquiry, which rummaged through a repertoire of Confucian virtue-ethical concepts to comprehend and articulate a program for the development of a Vietnamese civil society.

Why did this sudden developmental impulse appear in Cochinchina when it did, at the end of the decade? Here it may be useful to examine the moment in terms of the criteria for new organizational formation set out by sociologist Arthur Stinchcombe.⁴⁶⁰ First, the movement explicitly modelled itself on the available alternative organizational examples of Chinese and French businesses. Since they understood these models to be central to foreigner success, they reasonably believed the long-term profits to be gained from forming new organizations outweighed the short-term costs. As a specific social group, the Orchard Heartland Gentry sat at strategic choke point in the Cochinchinese rice economy. They also had cultural, educational and resource advantages over their counterparts from elsewhere in the colony. Furthermore, as an alliance of landowners, bureaucrats, and elected officials, they enjoyed unique access to the economic and political levers that would allow them to lay hold of these benefits. Lastly, since the French had eliminated the mandarin officialdom from Cochinchina, business people did not have to contend with the kinds of venality and rent seeking which hampered businesses in other parts of the colony.⁴⁶¹

Despite conditions which strongly favored a rapid development of civil society, social organizers like Gilbert Chiếu faced what Stinchcombe called the "liability of newness." The most formidable disadvantage facing new organizations is that they rely on strangers in a cultural tradition in which kinship obligations and virtues of loyalty were transcendent commitments. Clan loyalty undermined the movement's chief objective of investing with strangers, which was justified as an abstract and intangible national good. With this added conceptual apparatus, I can decode the gentry's invocation of the Confucian virtue of tín 信. The chief organizational dilemma facing their movement was how to overcome local and clan loyalties and thereby to move from corporate to a hegemonic mode of leadership, which itself depends on the critical reflection made possible by a civil society freed from the constraints of aristocratic virtues of loyalty.⁴⁶² The hotels were integral components of the Minh Tân strategy while building a denser

⁴⁶⁰ Arthur L. Stinchcombe, "Social Structure and Organizations," in *Handbook of Organizations*, ed. James G. March (Routledge, 1965), 149.

⁴⁶¹ Compare Liên Thành Fish Sauce, which was founded in Annam but had to move to Saigon to escape local officials' bribe seeking which almost destroyed the company.

⁴⁶² Economic corporate and hegemonic are Gramscian terms. I used economic-corporate solidarity to mean an alliance driven by shared but restricted material gain, often at the expense of rival groups. Hegemonic solidarity on the other hand refers to class alliances based in the greater, usually national, good. Due to widespread misuse of the term, it needs to be emphasized here that hegemony is not a form of illusion, misrecognition or false consciousness. Dylan Riley's specification is useful here. "a fully developed hegemony is a form of intellectual and moral leadership in which the mass of the population understands its own interests as being fundamentally compatible with

network of Vietnamese business and civic institutions was the sociological prerequisite for any later move to construct a political party. Student travel to Japan, while important for the long-term development of exilic revolutionary networks, was peripheral to the reform movement's central work, which was civic organizing.

Conclusion

To reiterate a few key points before moving on to the third part of this dissertation, the institutions of the Minh Tân movement, examined through the advertisements, charters, investor rolls, and letters to the editor preserved in *Talking Business* and *Six Provinces News*, do not resemble the front organizations for revolutionary subterfuge that the existing historiography would lead us to expect. The business operated publicly, and they aimed at a thoroughgoing reform of Vietnamese moral and political life. Gilbert Chiếu published the ups and downs of the Enlightened Renewal Industrial Corporation for more than a year in both *Talking Business* and *Six Provinces News*. Its agenda of vocational training, capital concentration, and industrial development corresponded to the plan laid out by Gilbert Chiếu in his public manifesto. The social centers in Saigon and Mỹ Tho offered consignment services, bookkeeping courses, legal consultations, electoral debates, and reform opera performances. These functions addressed concrete structural disadvantages facing Vietnamese businesses in markets that Chinese capital dominated, and they cannot be explained away as cover for surreptitious student travel to Japan. The rice trust, while less successful, aimed to displace Chinese middlemen in the Mekong rice trade by adapting corporate business structures, down to touting the English-language terminology of "General manager" and "Trust-company".

For Movement leaders, as well as for Lương Khắc Ninh before them, divorcing ownership from management through the formalization of distinct roles nurtured a new business ethic of trust among Vietnamese. Profit-making institutions, leaders believed, would bring with them a whole new set of moral dispositions, including entrepreneurial daring among the owners, transparency and accountability among the managers, and self-discipline and skill development among the working classes. The division of labor would incubate a new mode of life, one that reflected and nourished the selfless national solidarity needed to retake the Vietnamese birthright, here understood as the profits accruing to immigrant interlopers arising from their strategic position in commerce and finance.

Common parlance locates civil society in "nonprofit" or "non-government organizations," treating it as a third domain defined by its autonomy from both business and the state. This convention obscures how the three domains institutionally require and shape one another.⁴⁶³ The Cochinchinese reform institutions embodied this logic. The final chapter of this dissertation will

the dominant social group". It can only arise as part of a critical consciousness and formal freedom, which in turn can only exist in the institutional context of an elaborated network of civil society. See especially the notes collected under "The Modern Prince" in Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Dylan J. Riley, "Hegemony, Democracy, and Passive Revolution in Gramsci's Prison Notebooks," *California Italian Studies* 2, no. 2 (2011): 12, <https://doi.org/10.5070/C322008962>.

⁴⁶³ Returning to Hegel is helpful here. For him, civil society was the domain of economic association: the corporate bodies, professional groupings, and market institutions through which individuals' particular interests became legible as collective ones. Hegemony, for Gramsci, depends upon such an institutional infrastructure. A social group achieves hegemony when its economic program carries forward a broader social transformation, drawing allied and even antagonistic groups into its project. Dylan J. Riley, "Hegemony, Democracy, and Passive Revolution in Gramsci's Prison Notebooks," *California Italian Studies* 2, no. 2 (2011), <https://doi.org/10.5070/C322008962>.

trace the post Minh Tân shifts in civic organization leading to the Constitutionalist Party. At this earlier stage, business development was an integral aspect of the associational infrastructure needed to convert economic grievances into a program of national renewal.

Furthermore, the geography of the movement confirms the leadership role of the Orchard Heartland elites. The autonomous grassroots enterprises deserve particular emphasis in this regard, because they firmly testify to the movement's basis in local rural officialdom. For example, the retired village notables in Tầm Vu pooling resources for a retail shop, provincial councilors in Vĩnh Long founding an eastern medicine sundry, a modest mutual aid society for Chinese character teachers in Gò Công. Such initiatives had no conceivable connection to Phan Bội Châu's exilic network. They united under the Minh Tân banner owing to a common identification with the slogan of "Enlightened Renewal" as a program of Vietnamese commercial self-assertion, a program that gave dignifying expression to the practical ambitions of men whose administrative careers had acquainted them with the levers of local power but left them economically subordinate to Chinese and Indian competitors. That most of these enterprises were modest in scope, and the others of dubious feasibility, is beside the point. Their significance lies in what their existence reveals about the social base and political orientation of the movement that the historiography has consistently misinterpreted.

Stepping back from the institutions themselves, the broader arc of this second part of the dissertation can now be stated plainly. Part 1 established the anatomy of the Orchard Heartland Gentry: a regionally rooted elite concentrated in the near-delta provinces around the Tiền River, whose continuity with the precolonial gentry the Franco-Nguyễn Détente sustained, and whose worldview fused traditional cosmological commitments with a pragmatic accommodation of colonial modernity. Part 2 has tracked the translation of that worldview into political action. I have shown how Lương Khắc Ninh first set out the *đại thương* program in the pages of *Talking Business* — an anti-Chinese commercial nationalism that rallied the Orchard Heartland Gentry around the promise of economic sovereignty, but failed, across five years of editorializing, to mobilize his readership beyond applause and pledges of moral support. Gilbert Trần Chánh Chiếu succeeded where Ninh had failed. He arrived at *Talking Business* at a low moment, in the wake of the 1904 typhoons and the dethronement of the Emperor Thành Thái. But a tour of southern China galvanized him by showing him the provincial gentry's potential as agents of commercial modernization. Gilbert Chiếu crystallized the *đại thương* aspiration into the ideology of "Enlightened Renewal" — a program of capital concentration, vocational training, and cultural renewal. The institutions he built were the Orchard Heartland Gentry's first collective bid to translate their administrative authority and local notoriety into economic and, ultimately, political leadership.

The bid failed. The colonial police arrested Gilbert Chiếu in the autumn of 1908; his companies dissolved; and the institutional energy of the preceding year dissipated. The remaining chapters of this dissertation will address the questions raised by this failure. Part 3 opens with a question that is more historiographical than historical: how is it that scholars came to see a provincial business movement as an anticolonial revolutionary conspiracy? I argue that the answer lies in what I call "police historiography", a narrative constructed by the embryonic Sûreté Générale, which attributed the diverse discontents stirring across Indochina to the malevolent agency of conspiratorial cells, and which subsequent historians adopted with insufficient critical distance. With the orthodox account unsettled, I will address the historical question: if the Minh Tân movement was not a revolutionary network dismantled by the security state, then what caused its

collapse? I locate the answer in the intra-elite factionalism mapped out in Part 1, specifically in the rivalry between the provincial Gilbert Chiếu and high-ranking Saigon elites, Lê Văn Trung, Diệp Văn Cương, and Trần Bá Thọ, whose commercial and reputational interests were threatened by the movement's success. Finally, the dissertation closes by tracing the movement's afterlife. Though Gilbert Chiếu's arrest temporarily cowed it, the civic organizational energy of the Orchard Heartland gentry did not dissipate. It shifted into the mutual study societies, credit cooperatives, and sports leagues that became the institutional skeleton of the Constitutionalist Party, founded in 1917, and that animated the anti-Chinese boycotts of 1919. Gilbert Chiếu lost the battle for leadership. But his reformist platform and institutional forms defined the political horizon of the Cochinchinese elite for a generation.

The Collapse of Reform, Part One- Police Historiography and the Eclipse of Local Politics

Previous chapters have detailed the social base, worldview, and political mobilization of the Orchard Heartland Gentry—an old Mekong Delta elite who accommodated to French tutelage under the colonial promise of modernization and economic development. Although they rallied to the colonial project, they did not abandon their traditional values or their loyalty to the Nguyễn dynasty. Instead, they shifted from combatting French political power, to Chinese and Indian economic power. Lương Khắc Ninh first articulated this “big business” political program in the pages of *Talking Business* in 1901, and Gilbert Chiếu launched it into action with his Minh Tân movement in 1907.

The next two chapters will close the dissertation with a revisionist account of Gilbert Chiếu’s arrest and the integration of his story into the conventional historiography. This chapter is inspired by scholarship which has examined the role colonial police have played in the construction of national history and memory.⁴⁶⁴ In what follows, I critically analyze existing histories of the so-called “Gilbert Chieu Affair,” revealing them to be an example of *police historiography*—that is, a story shaped by the institutional needs of the embryonic General Security Service [*Sûreté Générale*] which was subsequently adopted by Vietnamese nationalist historians to construct a mythical narrative of unbroken anticolonial resistance. With the orthodox account unsettled, the next chapter will reconstruct the collapse of the Reform Movement in light of the elite Vietnamese factions and factionalism described in previous chapters. As will become clear, attacks by Vietnamese rivals were a prominent feature of Gilbert Chiếu’s downfall, but scholars too reliant on colonial police records have wholly ignored this critical part of the story.

The collapse of the Cochinchinese Reform Movement deserves attention because it might be seen as a challenge to this dissertation’s central claims. Gilbert Chiếu’s arrest was part of a colony-wide crackdown on “anti-French” political movements. The most important of these “anti-French” movements were peasant anti-tax riots across Annam and an assassination plot by Vietnamese colonial militia members in a Tonkin barracks which occurred over the spring and summer of 1908. Historians and colonial police alike have read this political violence alongside the history of travel to Japanese military academies by anti-colonial students, a patriotic educational project sponsored by an anti-colonial revolutionary exile named Phan Bội Châu and his associate, the royal pretender Cường Để. Gilbert Chiếu was arrested with 90 alleged co-conspirators as part of this so-called “Go East Movement,” and scholars have used this fact as the basis for depicting the southern “Reform Movement” as one component of a broader phenomenon of exilic literati-led “anticolonialism”.

I assert that the defining features of the southern movement were its distinctive anti-Chinese pro-business platform and its openness to colonial accommodation. These concerns predated and outlasted Gilbert Chiếu’s relations with Phan Bội Châu, showing the “Reform movement” to have been in programmatic continuity with its predecessor Lương Khắc Ninh in *Talking Business*

⁴⁶⁴ Most notably: Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Duke University Press, 1999); Shiraishi, *An Age in Motion*; Shahid Amin, *Event, Metaphor, Memory: Chauri Chaura, 1922-1992* (Univ of California Press, 1995); Maitrii Aung-Thwin, *The Return of the Galon King : History, Law, and Rebellion in Colonial Burma* (Ohio University Press, 2011).

on the one hand, and its successor Bùi Quang Chiêu and the Constitutionalist Party on the other--two figures impossible to classify as “anti-colonial literati.”

I will prove that the sources which form the basis of the orthodox account are *police historiography* in three steps. First, I will summarize the orthodox historical account of the “Gilbert Chiêu Affair.” The second section will examine the relevant passages from the leading Anglophone historian of the period, David Marr, paying attention to the irregularities and errors that appear in his account. Tracing these errors into Marr’s “Vietnamese sources” will show that what appears to be a consensus among native scholars is in fact a series of mischaracterizations and mistranslations from a single French colonial police source: Procurer General Michel’s 1909 report to the Governor General of Indochina, which summarized the failed case against Gilbert Chiêu and recommended legal reforms to address the “repressive void” in colonial jurisprudence.⁴⁶⁵

The third section will analyze the purposeful mischaracterizations of what? in the Michel Report and track its afterlife from internal administrative document to the political journalism of the interwar period. Importantly, Tonkinese intelligence operations that had been running for nearly a decade in southern China informed the report. Far from acting as a check on the expansion of these burgeoning security services, Gilbert Chiêu’s acquittal became the founding myth of their colony-wide consolidation. The Phan Bội Châu threat narrative justified the consolidation of previously disparate police intelligence services, culminating in the reorganization of the Bureau of Native Affairs and the Political Bureau into the Indochinese General Security.

This process began before the upheavals of 1908. The coincidence of the First World War and an outbreak of rural unrest, the so-called “1916 Troubles of Cochinchina,” further accelerated it. The scope of the 1916 rioting in particular caught Louis Marty, a 32-year-old intelligence officer with orientalist scholarly aspirations, off guard. He synthesized the manifold threats into a single explanation: a colony-wide network of sorcerer-led “secret societies.” In his telling, this timeless, dormant feature of oriental civilizations awaited leaders skilled and devious enough to energize it and thereby generate a xenophobic revolt against French colonial authority. In this version of the history, Phan Bội Châu and his southern lieutenant Gilbert Chiêu provided this leadership.

This version of the Gilbert Chiêu story first emerged in the internal documents of the colonial security services during the First World War, but it spread among the colonial public during the interwar period. In 1926, with the specter of anti-French political movements looming once again, a schoolteacher named Georges Coulet brought added his own anthropological interests and flair for the theatrical to the police documentation, producing his monograph *Secret Societies in the Annamese Lands*.⁴⁶⁶ When communism became the colonial hobgoblin of the 1930s, it fit into Coulet’s elaboration of Marty’s account, and Vietnamese moderates referenced Coulet to paint Communist subversion as a new manifestation of an ancient national pathological tendency toward revolutionary conspiracy.

But once the Coulet-Marty framework was out in the world, it was available for pirating by rival political forces, and it appealed to young anti-colonial activists positively disposed to

⁴⁶⁵ The Michel Document found in NF 8-28(2): “Indochine Nouveau Fonds Carton 8 Dossier 28(2),” n.d., Archives Nationales d’Outre-Mer (ANOM); Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism 1885-1925*; Patrice Morlat, *Les affaires politiques de l’Indochine, 1895-1923: les grands commis, du savoir au pouvoir* (Harmattan, 1995). p.124

⁴⁶⁶ Georges Coulet, *Les sociétés secrètes en terre d’Annam* (Ardin, 1926).

revolutionary violence. Already in the late 20s, Coulet's depiction had become a *how to* guide for nationalist subversion. When the colonial order collapsed after WWII, nationalist Vietnamese historians reclaimed Coulet for a history of anti-colonialism, preserving its essentially *police historiography* in the heroic tone of the national epic. In the case of the Gilbert Chiếu Affair and the Cochinchinese Reform Movement, this involved emphasizing the relatively less important Going East Movement while downplaying the more important pro-business agendas and ignoring both its anti-Chinese features and its intra-Vietnamese rivalries. Nationalist Vietnamese historians thereby fixed Gilbert Chiếu's movement as an appendage to the Phan Bội Châu story, and this framing came to dominate an Anglophone scholarship produced during the Second Indochina War.

The Orthodox Account of the Cochinchinese “Reform Movement”

Two recent survey histories of Vietnam by leading scholars in the field give a sense of current understandings of the movement.⁴⁶⁷ Both surveys mention Gilbert Chiếu only in a brief passage as part of longer treatments of Phan Bội Châu and Phan Chu Trinh—two exilic literati from the Central Region who have come to symbolize competing revolutionary and reformist paths of Vietnamese nationalism.⁴⁶⁸ These men read “the writings of the Chinese reformers Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao,”⁴⁶⁹ and they “discussed what was to be done with like-minded friends, veterans of the Can Vương movement, reformist mandarins, and patriotic youths.”⁴⁷⁰ They were exam graduates, with ties to the imperial court in Huế, and Phan Bội Châu used this prestige to recruit “the Nguyen prince, Cuong De, to the society and made him honorary president. Their idea was to attract the widest possible support” by advertising the prince as the future leader of an independent constitutional monarchy.⁴⁷¹ Phan Bội Châu then solicited Japanese military aid and arranged Vietnamese student travel to Japanese military and technical academies, launching the Going East Movement [*đông du*].

Cochinchina's version of the “Reform Movement” factors into the story as an appendage to the “Going East Movement.” For Keith Weller Taylor, “by 1907, over one hundred Vietnamese boys had arrived in Japan to receive a modern education. More than half of these aspiring students came from Cochinchina and most of the expenses of this educational program came from landowners there.”⁴⁷² In these histories, Gilbert Chiếu figures as a Cochinchinese sideshow to the

⁴⁶⁷ K. W. Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese* (Cambridge University Press, 2013); Goscha, *Vietnam*.

⁴⁶⁸ Although this contrast is dated, it still animates the scholarship. Taylor for example describes the movement of the period as “an overlap of people involved in this educational movement from both those of Phan Chu Trinh's reformist persuasion and those more inclined toward Phan Bội Châu's advocacy of an armed uprising against the French”, see Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese*, 489.

⁴⁶⁹ Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese*, 488.

⁴⁷⁰ ‘Cần Vương (“Aid the King”) Movement was the loyalist resistance to French conquest, 1885–1896, led by mandarin officials of the Nguyễn court. Quote from Goscha, *Vietnam*, 98.

⁴⁷¹ *ibid*

⁴⁷² Taylor *ibid*. To Taylor's credit, he does mention anti-Chinese sentiment, saying the Cochinchinese sponsors were “dissatisfied with the French regime, both for its racism toward them and for how it facilitated the dominance of the Chinese entrepreneurs in the local economy.” Unfortunately, due to his idiosyncratic citation scheme, it's impossible to determine the basis for this claim. In my research I haven't seen documentation connecting the anti-Chinese movement directly to student travel in this way. Furthermore, the prosecutorial evidence against Chiếu itself is emphatic that many of the students traveled for career opportunities and were swindled and felt deceived by Phan Bội Châu on arrival. However, it will become clear from what follows that there are ample grounds to treat the prosecution's case against Gilbert Chiếu with extreme skepticism.

main events in Tonkin and Annam.⁴⁷³ They remark on his French citizenship but without examining its significance. They list him as a “newspaper editor”, “landowner”, “entrepreneur”, and “businessman” without explaining how these roles bear on the Reform Movement. Instead, his most salient characteristic is that he “had been the in-country contact for sending funds and students from Cochinchina to Phan Boi Chau in Japan” and that he “encouraged southern youth, including his son, to study in Japan”. The surveys fail to mention the anti-Chinese and pro-business movement that coalesced under Gilbert Chiếu’s leadership. Instead, they narrate the story as either an episode in the saga of French blindness to subaltern demands for colonial reform, or as a node in inter-Asian intellectual networks. These are important aspects of the Gilbert Chiếu story, but focusing on them has distracted from his role in the development of a self-confident Cochinchinese business elite.⁴⁷⁴

The coincidences in perspective between these historical surveys is a product of shared sources. Two secondary accounts have shaped the historiography, Ralph Bernard Smith’s 1972 “The Development of Opposition to French Rule in Southern Vietnam” and David Marr’s 1971 *Vietnamese Anticolonialism*.⁴⁷⁵ The two works differ in several respects. Smith’s regionally focused article draws largely on French archival and journalistic sources, while Marr’s colony-spanning monograph drew on Vietnamese-language memoirs and secondary scholarship produced in Hanoi in the 1950s and 60s. Yet, despite using different, the two scholars share three

⁴⁷³ For a detailed introduction to Gilbert Chieu’s biography and writing see chapter 6 of this dissertation. In the two recent surveys, he receives a few lines. Such brevity is expected from texts responsible for centuries of national history. But the brevity nonetheless makes clear the degree of the Southern Reform Movement’s subordination to the Going East Movement. The relevant passages from Taylor and Goscha are as follows: “Meanwhile, in Cochinchina, Gilbert Tran Chanh Chieu (1867-1919), a French citizen who was a Saigon newspaper editor and businessman, was arrested, along with many of his associates, when the French became aware of his activities on behalf of Phan Boi Chau. He had been the in-country contact for sending funds and students from Cochinchina to Phan Boi Chau in Japan. The French had informants among a group of wealthy Cochinchinese who traveled with aspiring students to meet with Phan Boi Chau in Japan in early 1908.” Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese*, 490; “Yet the Go East Movement was not just an Annam and Tonkin Affair. Wealthy landowners and pro-Ngyuen royalists in Cochinchina also provided financial support and recruits. Gilbert Tran Chanh Chieu was a well-known Mekong landowner, entrepreneur, and naturalized French citizen. He encouraged southern youth, including his son, to study in Japan.” Goscha, *Vietnam*, 99

⁴⁷⁴ There are important differences in the two accounts which distinguish the way the movement fits into the two authors’ broader understanding of the period. For example, Taylor’s passages appears in a section on the “1908 disturbances and their sequel”, which implies coordination between the upheavals in the three *pays*, before drawing the hesitant lesson that “it may appear that the most important aspect of the 1908 disturbances was the road not taken by French authorities, as if they were incapable of comprehending Phan Chu Trinh’s critique of the mandarinat and of acting on it to promote a more modern administration.” Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese*, 491; Whereas Taylor frames the movement as a struggle between a Vietnamese desire for modernity and French blindness to these subaltern desires, Goscha is concerned with correcting eurocentrism and unraveling a knot of inter-Asian and metropolitan ideological and organizational connections which would inform the later Indochina Wars. Thus, Goscha’s passage appears in a section entitled, “Phan Boi Chau and the Asian Sources of Vietnamese Reformism”, which is in turn part of the chapter “Rethinking Vietnam”. Goscha *Vietnam*, P99

⁴⁷⁵ A third important source is Pierre Brocheux’s 1992 “Note sur Gilbert Chieu”. Brocheux’s “note” is a special case that takes seriously Gilbert Chieu’s anti-Chinese Pro Business platform and thereby establishes a revisionist wedge which, though strongly influencing this dissertation, has been left unexplored by subsequent historians. Hue Tam Ho Tai, who only indirectly mentions the movement, is still noteworthy for also acknowledging the importance of Anti Chinese dimension, she does however maintain the anticolonial thesis. See, Smith, “The Development of Opposition to French Rule in Southern Vietnam 1880-1940”; Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism 1885-1925*; Tai, *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution*, 25; Brocheux, “Note Sur Guilbert Chiếu (1867-1919), Citoyen Français et Patriote Vietnamien.”

similarities. First, both narrate the Reform Movement as a stage in a decolonial history that was preceded by late 19th century traditional resistance movement led classically educated scholar-gentry and succeed by an interwar period marked by the birth of modern mass nationalist movements. Second, they both frame the movement as an ideological and organizational appendage of Phan Bội Châu. Third, neither mentions the movement's anti-Chinese agenda. These three shared features derive from a common reliance on prejudicial police reporting. In my reading, lack of attention to the anti-Chinese program is the most consequential of the three shared features. Since the anti-Chinese movement is so prominent in the movement's own periodicals, it is hard to imagine that Smith or Marr might have overlooked this theme had they consulted the movement's newspapers.

One further difference: Smith acknowledges the movement's business dimensions, while Marr downplays them. In Marr's words, "The thrust [of the Reform Movement] was twofold: opening new commercial ventures either to support students going abroad or to finance increased activity within clandestine societies previously existent in the area; and careful, 'legitimate' expression of nationalist ideas and ideals in the local press, both French and quoc-ngu."⁴⁷⁶ For Marr, the businesses were "more important as centers for liaison and as purveyors of anticolonial literature" than as "profit-making institutions". He argues the hotels were meant to conceal distribution points for "assorted amulets, seals, banners, and brevets of more local derivation" and "signed pictures and personal letters of authorization" from the royal pretender in exile, Prince Cường Để. Marr thereby sidelines the business movement to foreground various "traditional" forms of political activity.

By invoking "assorted amulets", Marr signals his reliance on the interpretative framework developed by Georges Coulet, whose flawed research will concern the latter half of this chapter. Previous chapters have shown that the business class whose voice features in the pages of *Talking Business* and *Six Provinces News* were hostile to popular Buddhism and Chinese-style mafia organizations. This elite saw such organizations as superstitious, backwards, and wasteful foreign imports, and as an obstacle to Vietnamese empowerment.⁴⁷⁷ I do not believe Marr intentionally avoided these debates; rather, I read their absence, alongside his neglect of the movement's anti-Chinese program, as evidence that he had very likely not read the business movement's own literature.⁴⁷⁸

⁴⁷⁶ Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism 1885-1925*, 144.

⁴⁷⁷ For the views of the broader elite as seen in gazetteers and literature of the period see chapter 4, for the political and press attacks on these organizations in the founding years of *Talking Business* under Luong Khắc Ninh see Chapter 5. For Gilbert Chieu's wide ranging and explosive religion debate in *Six Provinces News* see chapter 6.

⁴⁷⁸ Marr's oversight here is at times stark. For example, Marr follows colonial prosecutors in understanding Phan Bội Châu's commercial strategy as the source for the Cochinchinese Reform Movement. In his discussion, Marr mentions that "local entrepreneurs were even encouraged to pool their capital with the overseas Chinese—an indication of Phan's supreme confidence, if not his comprehension of the basic problems involved." But such an error represents more than a fundamental incomprehension. It is evidence that Phan Bội Châu's plans had little influence on a southern business movement that both predated and outlasted the brief exodus of Vietnamese students to Japan, a fact that subverts Marr's exclusively "anticolonial" characterization. Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism*, 131.

The Red Herring of “Vietnamese Sources”

Marr’s dismissal of the business movement makes sense only against his background and his stature in the field. Marr is the most influential anglophone historian of colonial Vietnam.⁴⁷⁹ Two aspects of his work stand out. The first is that his early career was defined by a dedication to anti-war political activism. He first came to Vietnam as a Marine intelligence officer from 1962-1963. He left the military to pursue a Ph.D. in History at University of California Berkeley, which he completed in 1969 to take up an assistant professorship at Cornell from 1969-1971.⁴⁸⁰ Marr organized on campus through the anti-war movement’s peak years.⁴⁸¹ He was a member of the Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars (CCAS), the radical caucus of U.S. Asia scholars founded in 1968 to oppose the war and challenge the field’s establishment; and a blurb bearing the organization’s endorsement graces the front cover of *Anticolonialism*. Marr framed the text as the act of an intellectual grappling with activism and as an argument for the futility of the war, placing it within the long development of an anticolonial “Vietnamese identity”.⁴⁸² After its publication, Marr took a brief hiatus from academic employment to dedicate himself full-time to anti-war activism, serving as editor at the Indochina Resource Center, the anti-war research-and-publishing operation in Washington D.C. that briefed Congress and journalists on the conduct of the war, from 1971 to the fall of Saigon in 1975. Only once the war had ended did he return to academia, taking up a position at the Australian National University, where he spent the remainder of his career researching and writing field defining monographs.

The second defining feature of Marr’s work was his use of Vietnamese language scholarship and primary source compendiums. Marr touted this aspect of *Anticolonialism*, writing that “one of the historiographical aims of this book is to demonstrate that the time has come to take Vietnamese-language (quoc-ngu) sources quite seriously.”⁴⁸³ The field hailed this as an

⁴⁷⁹ A comparison to Ralph Smith is again telling. The above discussed essay “The Development of opposition to French rule in Southern Vietnam 1880-1940”, is one of the most important articles in the study of colonial Cochinchina but has only been cited 20 times according to Google Scholar records. Compare Marr’s *Vietnamese Anticolonialism*, which has been cited a whopping 660 times. Its sequel, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial 1920-1945*, has been cited 1,004 times. Even his works on the revolutionary period, which have a lesser stature in his oeuvre, stand out as some of the most cited in the field: *Vietnam 1945: The Quest for Power* has been cited 462 times, and its sequel *Vietnam: State, War, and Revolution 1945-1946* has been cited 104. The only other monograph in Vietnamese studies with comparable stature is Alexander Woodside’s *Vietnam and the Chinese Model*, cited 776 times. But Woodside’s is a singular work focused on the relatively neglected period of late-imperial history, whereas Marr dominates the more crowded world of Vietnamese colonial political history and thus shaped debate on the origins of Vietnamese nationalism and communism.

⁴⁸⁰ See also the brief biographical contextualization of Marr in: Alec Holcombe, “The Role of the Communist Party in the Vietnamese Revolution: A Review of David Marr’s *Vietnam: State, War, and Revolution (1945–1946)*,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 11, nos. 3–4 (2016): 298–364, <https://doi.org/10.1525/jvs.2016.11.3-4.298>.

⁴⁸¹ A taste of the intense atmosphere is found in the memoirs of historian David Elliot, then a graduate student at Cornell, great admirer and self-described “close personal friend” of Marr, who shared Marr’s opinions on the war. Elliot nonetheless refers to Marr and other members of the Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars as “inquisitors” for the way they publicly humiliated Thai specialists Lauriston Sharp and David Wyatt for participating in the Academic Advisory Committee for Thailand, which was funded by USAID. David Elliott, *Ivory Tower Interlude*, December 17, 2019, <https://pressbooks.pub/vietnamesedays/chapter/ivory-tower-interlude/>.

⁴⁸² The preface opens with the sentence: “Events of the past five or ten years in Vietnam understandably have transfixed the world and sent many of us, in some fashion, to the barricades. For all our concentration on the present, however, even cursory examination serves to reveal how much we are prisoners of the past as Vietnamese and foreigners both act out roles delineated many years ago.” Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism*, xv

⁴⁸³ Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism*, xvi

innovation, with reviewers praising it as a corrective to the distortions of prejudicial and imperially motivated colonial scholarship.⁴⁸⁴ The field's embrace of "Vietnamese sources" fit a broader trend toward "autonomous histories" then fashionable in Southeast Asian studies, which sought to recover indigenous dynamics from dominant "Europe-centric" perspectives that observed the region as "from the deck of the ship" and left its people "grey and undifferentiated".⁴⁸⁵ Marr's intervention thus arrived at a tense moment for a field methodologically receptive to the notion that native language sources were superior to foreign ones, and politically receptive to the implication that "Vietnamese sources" proved the impracticality and immorality of the Vietnam War. Taken together, Marr is the academic anti-war movement's most consequential historian: he has done more than anyone to formalize its central insights. The book's methodological innovations and factual discoveries deserve recognition. However, in the case of Gilbert Chiếu and the Reform Movement, his contributions they have come at the cost of significant distortions.

What accounts for Marr's dismissal of the business movement? There seem to be two factors at work. The first and less important factor is Marr's polemic with the French Marxist sinologist Jean Chesneaux, who argued that the nationalist movement after 1905 should be understood as part of an increasingly assertive native bourgeoisie.⁴⁸⁶ Marr's responded that capital was too scarce for the emergence of a robust bourgeoisie and that the "supposedly capitalist enterprises" were "not always for economic motives." As I have shown, Marr is concerned chiefly with establishing the continuity of a Vietnamese tradition of "anticolonialism" from nineteenth century royalist elements to the communist movement via the literati activist Phan Bội Châu. This means "Vietnamese identity" is defined by a thread of anti-colonial nationalism which stretches through, rather than arises from, the colonial creation of modern administrative, market, and media institutions. Marr is therefore at odds with a strain of explanation, typical across the historiographies of other Southeast Asian nations, which tracks the mutual development of anticolonial nationalism with the birth of a native business class and mass media.⁴⁸⁷ The debate motivates Marr to downplay the business movement, and therefore to ignore its anti-Chinese

⁴⁸⁴ See for example, Milton Osborne, "Anti-Colonialism and War in Vietnam - Vietnamese Anticolonialism 1885–1925. By David G. Marr. University of California Press: Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1971. Pp. Xix, 322. 11.95, £5.70.," *Modern Asian Studies* 7, no. 3 (1973): 747–54, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X00005394>.

⁴⁸⁵ John R. W. Smail, "On the Possibility of an Autonomous History of Modern Southeast Asia," *Journal of Southeast Asian History* 2, no. 2 (1961): 76.

⁴⁸⁶ Jean Chesneaux, *Contribution à l'histoire de la nation vietnamienne* (Éditions sociales, 1955).p159-182. Marr was also in dialogue with the Vietnamese communist historians in Hanoi who largely shared Chesneaux's perspective. For example, in the preface Marr names "Nguyen Cong Binh" as having facilitated his research in the country. This is author of the foundational Vietnamese scholarship on the topic. See: Nguyễn Công Bình, *Tìm Hiểu Giai Cấp Tư Sản Việt Nam Thời Pháp Thuộc* (Nhà xuất bản Văn Sử Địa, 1959).Marr questioned Chesneaux's assessment in the following terms, "Can the events of the first decade of the twentieth century, the formation of the Duy Tân Hội, the Dong Du movement, and the Dong Kinh Nghĩa Thục, best be understood in terms of the emergence of a new bourgeois class in Vietnam? Is that the most significant way to relate activist and reformist positions to the matrix of social and economic change? I do not believe so. On the basis of the evidence, it seems unrealistic to argue for the existence of a conscious, self-assertive bourgeois class—even a small one—until after World War I. Before 1918, established bourgeois families in Vietnam were to be counted on one or two hands. And even those families had a very limited capital, the members often having to serve as managers and salesmen in their own establishments. As I have pointed out, many supposedly capitalist enterprises were set up and funded by inexperienced scholar-gentry, and not always for economic motives". Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism*, p.202-203

⁴⁸⁷ Shiraishi, *An Age in Motion*; Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Verso, 2006).

features — features which, as I argue in chapters 4–6, are central to the Vietnamese business class’s political program.

The more consequential factor is that the same oversights characterize Marr’s sources. Marr does not appear to have consulted the newspapers central to the movement. Rather, he relied on summaries of these sources found in midcentury northern Vietnamese secondary scholarship. Compounding the errors inherent in this approach, the Vietnamese scholars of the era hadn’t read the original sources either. Though they purport to provide a “Vietnamese perspective,” these secondary “Vietnamese” sources on the Reform Movement, and by proxy the bulk of the anglophone historiography, appear to rest on a single colonial report from Procureur General Michel to the Governor General. This report misrepresented Gilbert Chiếu’s publishing record to exaggerate his “anticolonial” politics and his allegiance to Phan Bội Châu. Coulet read this report. Then Vietnamese nationalist historians translated Coulet’s distorted summary back into Vietnamese, from whence it was brought into English by Marr. From these findings, I will argue that the orthodox line on the Reform Movement is largely derived from a colonial police practice of threat magnification undertaken to legitimize an expansion of the colonial state’s repressive capacities.

Marr’s account of the Cochinchinese Reform Movement relies on three kinds of sources: French colonial-era documents, a handful of contemporary newspaper articles, and mid-century Vietnamese historical writing. I take up the French documents last, since they explain the oversights shared by the rest of the sources. I start with Marr’s newspaper citations, since tracing the permutations in the mistranslations of these titles shows the fingerprints of the Procureur General. The errors suggest that the mid-century Vietnamese nationalist historians were attempting to reverse engineer Vietnamese titles and article summaries from French mistranslations. The discrepancies that follow undermine the taken-for-granted historiographical presupposition that Gilbert Chiếu turned *Six Provinces News* into an organ for anti-French propaganda; they should also cast doubt on the reliability of French police sources more generally.

Marr cites three issues of *Six Provinces News* in support of his claim that the periodical “published subtle, yet risky articles on such matters as agricultural aid groups and popular financial cooperatives, even implying support of political insurrections if the government failed to move to alleviate rural problems.”⁴⁸⁸ He provides no Vietnamese titles, authors, or page numbers for the articles in question. One of the citations is for an “October 17th, 1907” issue, a month before the newspaper was founded.⁴⁸⁹ Later in the same paragraph, he states that Nguyễn An Khương, Gilbert Chiếu’s lieutenant and the manager at *Six Provinces News*, was “noted for his periodical *Nong Co Min Dam*.”⁴⁹⁰ Nguyễn An Khương, however, was manager of *Six Provinces News*, and held no office at *Talking Business*. These inaccuracies raise suspicions that Marr did not consult copies of either periodical, as it is unlikely such a meticulous historian working from the originals would miss the names and dates on the masthead.

Marr inherits these errors from his Vietnamese-language sources, three of which he cites for his account of Gilbert Chiếu: a short 1950 booklet by Phương Hữu entitled *The Great Go East*

⁴⁸⁸ Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism*, 144

⁴⁸⁹ A list of dates for issues can be found on Sơn Nam, *Phong trào Duy Tân ở Bắc, Trung, Nam*, 228.

⁴⁹⁰ Note that Marr follows Osborne in mistranslated “*Nông cổ mìn đàm*” as “Tribune of Old Agricultural People”, I’ve translated it in this dissertation as “Talking Business Over Tea”.

Movement; Communist historian Trần Huy Liệu's 1955 *Vietnam's Modern Revolution* book 3; and South Vietnamese intellectual Nguyễn Văn Hậu's 1964 biography *The Hero Nguyễn Quang Diêu*.⁴⁹¹ All of these focus on Phan Bội Châu and only indirectly touch on Gilbert Chiếu. Each of these sources is problematic in different ways. For example, Marr cites the Nguyễn Quang Diêu biography for his claim that "Nguyễn An Khuong, already noted for his periodical *Nong Co Min Dam* (Tribune of Old Agricultural People [sic]) and his quoc-ngu translations of Chinese novels, invested heavily in the Chieu-Nam hotel in order to hand the profits over to students leaving for Japan."⁴⁹² But Nguyễn Quang Diêu didn't go abroad until 1913, five years after the collapse of the Reform Movement.⁴⁹³ These chronological problems should be weighed alongside the character of the text itself. Although it merits attention as a rare resource in a field lacking firsthand testimony, it suffers from a hagiographic quality and a dubious source base, both factors that should lead the historian to treat it with caution.⁴⁹⁴

Although he provides no article titles or page numbers, the dates Marr cites for his claim that *Six Provinces News* published "subtle, yet risky, articles on such matters as agricultural aid groups and popular financial cooperatives, even implying support of political insurrections if the government failed to move to alleviate rural problems" matches the dates in the identical passage which appears in both Nguyễn Văn Hậu's *The Hero Nguyễn Quang Diêu* and the *Great Go East Movement*.⁴⁹⁵ This crucial paragraph appears in varied forms across French and Vietnamese

⁴⁹¹ Phan Bội Châu's three memoirs *Ngục Trung Thư*, *Niên Biểu* and *Tự Phán*, are by far the most important to Marr. These sources deserve the sort of careful critical handling typical for memoirs written by statesmen curating their legacy, but they will receive less attention here because they are not contributors to the Police Historiography. Phương Hữu, *Phong-trào đại-dông-du* (Nam-Việt, 1950); Trần Huy Liệu, *Cách mạng cận đại Việt-Nam* (Ban nghiên cứu văn sử địa, 1955); Nguyễn Văn Hậu, *Chí Sĩ Nguyễn Quang Diêu* (Nhà xuất bản Xây Dựng, 1964).

⁴⁹² Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism*, 78

⁴⁹³ Few of the claims presented by Diêu's biography are cited to specific sources, but the page Marr cites here is particularly dubious, since it is meant to provide background and is almost certainly drawn from unreferenced secondary sources. The reference points to the introduction of a chapter entitled "Mr. Nguyễn and the first steps of the Going East movement". The only connection offered is that "though Diêu was in school," i.e., not yet affiliated with the movement, "he didn't forget to follow the political situation." (p32) This dubious assertion—what would it mean to "follow" the political situation? -- is the occasion for Hậu to provide some general history on the Go East Movement from 1907-1909. The information Hậu relates is unreferenced but likely drawn from Phương Hữu, since the subsequent page bears a footnote with some biographical information about Chiếu and concludes with a poem written by Phương Hữu. In a game of historiographical telephone, the section was then misrepresented by Marr in subtle ways. First, Hậu doesn't say about Khuong that *Talking Business* was "his periodical", but simply that he "từng viết cho" [had once written for] it. Nor does Hậu claim that, following Marr, Chieu Nam Hotel was founded "in order to hand the profits over to students leaving for Japan", but rather only that he "bỏ vốn ra lập khách-sạn Chiếu Nam lâu để đưa rước thanh niên xuất dương", that is, "he spent his capital to establish Hotel For Vietnamese to shuttle youths travelling overseas". Nguyễn Văn Hậu, *Chí Sĩ Nguyễn Quang Diêu*, 32.

⁴⁹⁴ According to the author's own account, his interest in the subject was piqued after recognizing Diêu's name mentioned in Nguyễn Hiến Lê's history of the Tonkin Free School, and he wrote the history based on sources he compiled in 1959 and 1960. These include an account written by Diêu's descendants which "were written according to memory," an account written by Diêu's one-time neighbor Nguyễn Minh Dương, information from movement activist Nguyễn Thân Hiến's genealogy which had been copied down by his grandson, unspecified "sources on Diêu's life and poetry" given him by local college professor, two of Diêu's poetry anthologies and two short historical monographs: Tôn Thất Lê's 1957 *The revolutionary life of Cuong De* and Phương Hữu's 1950 *The Great Go East Movement*— the same monographs that Marr relies on for much of *Anticolonialism*, thereby artificially inflating the number of sources. Tôn Thất Lê, *Cuộc Đời Cách Mạng Cường Để* (Saigon, n.d.); Phương Hữu, *Phong-trào đại-dông-du*; Nguyễn Văn Hậu, *Chí Sĩ Nguyễn Quang Diêu*, xxi-xxii.

⁴⁹⁵ Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism 1885-1925*, 144; Phương Hữu, *Phong-trào đại-dông-du*, 28-29; Nguyễn Văn Hậu, *Chí Sĩ Nguyễn Quang Diêu*, 33. Note that Phương Hữu's *The Great Going East Movement* contains neither

sources, and is the key to uncovering the univocality of what ostensibly appears to be a manifold set of sources. Make special note of the details which I've emphasized in bold:

Right from the 17th of October 1907, he [Gilbert Chieu] published in *Le Moniteur des Provinces* an article **encouraging agriculture** [một bài **khuyến khích về nông nghiệp**] which **implied a call to our countrymen for an uprising**;⁴⁹⁶ a few months later, he, one after the other, published in Six Provinces News the article “**Lê Tân văn**” within which he told the story of a **stepmother Lê thị Vân** who abused her adopted children in order to satisfy her vile, despicable urges. The whole article had anti-French intentions. On the 12th of December, he posted a story appealing to the masses to no longer follow the orders of the French rulers under the title “**When upper class figures revolt**” [**khi những nhân vật thượng đẳng khởi nghĩa**]. Lastly, on the 13th of January 1908, there appeared in Six Provinces News, of which he was the chief editor, an article championing an attack on French barracks in Rach Gia with the title “**Mutual aid and assistance among countrymen and discussing the righteousness of mutual assistance**” [**sự hỗ tương phù trợ giữa đồng bào và bàn về nghĩa hỗ tương phù trợ**]. The propaganda in Six Provinces News caught the French rulers' attention and worried them, so he temporarily **ceased using the press for propaganda**, turning instead to business.⁴⁹⁷

The supposedly subversive articles are distorted versions of those already analyzed in chapter six of this dissertation. To summarize, Phương Hữu is correct that the October 17th article, which allegedly implied “a call to uprising,” appeared in *Le Moniteur des Provinces*, the French-language Saigon weekly also edited by Gilbert Chiếu, and not in *Six Provinces News*.

Unfortunately, the October issues of this periodical are no longer extant, but misadventures in translating its title reappear in the other sources. Phương Hữu then identifies an article he calls “Lê Tân văn” in *Six Provinces News*. Here, he is attempting to reference the article “Stepfather and Stepchildren” [*Cha ghê con ghê*], which was discussed at length in chapter six, and which recounted a fable of a man named “Lê Thái Vân,” not a woman named “Lê thị Vân.” He was a stepfather, not mother, who raped his daughters. Similar errors in title and content characterize the other examples. There is no article with the title “When upper class characters revolt”, in the December 12th issue. Rather, Phương Hữu intends to refer to “Injustice above breeds chaos below” [Thượng bất chánh hạ tác loạn]. This article is described as “anti-French” but as shown in chapter six, it is in fact an appeal to Vietnamese colonial officials to show mercy toward the impoverished Vietnamese residents of the Mekong Delta. Similar mistakes characterize the third article, which was discussing the mid 19th century resistance figure Nguyễn Trung Trực and which appears in the January 23rd issue, not the January 13th issue. Although, its title doesn't include “Mutual aid and assistance”, it does mention “discussing”. However, its title is “Discussing the times” [Nhàn đàm tức sự kiêu thời]. Phương Hữu thus partially invokes the title, but oddly misstates the Vietnamese, using the anachronistic modern phrase “bàn về” instead of the older more appropriate “nhàn đàm”.

Similar errors characterize Marr's third reference, Trần Huy Liệu's 1957 *Vietnam's Modern Revolution*, book 3, which is cited in support of the claim that Gilbert Chiếu founded businesses

citations nor bibliography. It is a thin, 78-page book, with 21 short 2–5-page chapters. It is more a nationalist hagiography than a piece of critical history. Its lack of sourcing makes it difficult to determine with certainty which texts were consulted.

⁴⁹⁶ Note from Brocheux here?

⁴⁹⁷ Phương Hữu, *Phong-trào đại-đông-du*, 28–29.

while “simultaneously serving as editor of two newspapers published in Saigon”.⁴⁹⁸ But the page Marr cites does not correspond to Trần Huy Liệu’s discussion of Gilbert Chiếu’s journalistic and business activities. Rather, it gives general figures for the number of Vietnamese students in Japan in 1905 and the purported curriculum at two Japanese schools.⁴⁹⁹ Trần Huy Liệu’s sole reference to Gilbert Chiếu appears in a footnote two pages later, which is marred by inconsistencies like those appearing in Phương Hữu. Although Trần Huy Liệu clearly intended to discuss three of the same articles as Phương Hữu, he uses different incorrect Vietnamese titles.⁵⁰⁰

These consistent errors suggest that their authors were independently guessing at the original Vietnamese titles from a French translation. That Marr opted to dispense with titles altogether implies that he recognized the discrepancies in his sources. Loathe to get bogged down in the historiographical quagmire, Marr avoided the problem altogether by only citing dates. Unfortunately, he didn’t question whether such discrepancies might reflect poorly on the reliability of the underlying information, and the factoids have since formed the basis for our understanding of the whole Gilbert Chiếu affair.

Marr’s avoidance of the discrepancies is suspicious because the information in these paragraphs is a mistranslation of a paragraph in Georges Coulet’s 1926 *Secret Societies in the Land of Annam*, which Coulet in turn copied almost verbatim from Procureur General Michel’s 1909 report on Gilbert Chiếu’s trial to the Governor General. Marr was clearly aware of both these documents, because he cites them elsewhere in his account of the Reform and Going East Movements. Marr does not cite the passage in Coulet, despite citing Coulet elsewhere to claim connections between the Gilbert Chiếu movement and a supposed network of Buddhist pagodas.⁵⁰¹

⁴⁹⁸ Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism*, 144 footnote 75.

⁴⁹⁹ This text is tightly focused on events in Japan, Tonkin, and Annam. There are five distinct sections: a 6-page introduction; 19 pages on the Go East Movement; 26 pages on the Tonkin Free School, 40 pages on the Annam tax riots, and 6 pages on the Hanoi Poison Plot. Cochinchina hardly features at all. Marr cites Trần Huy Liệu, *Cách mạng cận đại Việt-Nam*, 25.

⁵⁰⁰ Trần Huy Liệu seems unaware of Gilbert Chiếu’s Vietnamese name, calling him “Nguyễn Chánh Chiếu” instead of Trần Chánh Chiếu, a mistake also made by the French police. He states the October 17th, 1907, issue of *Six Provinces News* took advantage of Pierre Jeantet’s lax management to “turn the paper into a medium for propagandizing violence” with an article entitled “encouraging agriculture” [khuyến nông].⁵⁰⁰ But *Six Provinces News* wasn’t founded until mid-November. Though he makes similar errors to Phương Hữu, Trần Huy Liệu does them in a distinct way, using the terms “khuyến nông,” instead of Hữu’s “khuyến khích về nông nghiệp”. Also, unlike Phương Hữu, Trần Huy Liệu correctly names the December 12th article “injustice above breeds chaos below” [thượng bất chính, hạ tắc loạn]. Recall that Phương Hữu mistitled this article, “khi những nhân vật thượng đẳng khởi nghĩa,” -- when superiors revolt. Furthermore, whereas Hữu combines two January articles into a single one entitled “Mutual aid and assistance among countrymen and discussing the righteousness of mutual assistance” [sự hỗ tương phù trợ giữa đồng bào và bàn về nghĩa hỗ tương phù trợ], Trần Huy Liệu distinguishes them as two articles which he calls “Solidarity among countrymen” [hợp quần giữa các đồng bang] and “discussing the times” [nói chuyện thời sự]. Thus, he comes quite close in the latter circumstance but also employs a distinctly anachronistic formulation, “nói chuyện” instead of Hữu’s “bàn về”. The actual title used the term “nhân đàm”. Trần Huy Liệu, *Cách mạng cận đại Việt-Nam*, 27.

⁵⁰¹ Marr cites 6 different sections of Coulet in support of two separate claims. In the first claim, *Anticolonialism*, 143-144, Marr discusses a Cao Lãnh pagoda supposedly used as a meeting space by the revolutionary student exile Nguyễn Quang Diệu in 1910. Even if true, the events occurred after the end of the Reform Movement, a fact Marr leaves out. Marr’s account of Nguyễn Quang Diệu is cited to Nguyễn Văn Hậu, *Chí Sĩ Nguyễn Quang Diệu* 33-36. The specific claim about Cao Lãnh bonzes, which appears on p36, is clearly meant to take place after Tonkin Free School Activists were released from Con Dao Prison and exiled in the South in 1910. Page 38 states unequivocally

Table 1 appended to the end of this chapter juxtaposes the relevant passages for ease of comparison. Procureur General Michel, Georges Coulet, and the intelligence agent Louis Marty will be introduced in the next section, but the comparison makes clear a plausible transmission vector. Michel (item 6) writes first in 1909. Marty's first report (item 5), which was probably written in 1914, didn't initially copy the passage from Michel. His later more famous series of studies on the history of "anti-French agitation" (item 4) however, did copy it verbatim. It's unclear whether Georges Coulet had access to Marty's later studies when he researched *Secret Societies* (item 3) sometime in the mid 1920s. We do know that he had Michel's reports on Gilbert Chiếu because he noted that the relevant dossiers were appended to cases against two defendants in the 1916 Troubles.

This and other odd features of Coulet's study will be covered in the next section, here I point out that Coulet introduced the telltale errors that characterize the Vietnamese Sources. For example, Michel mistakes the title of Stepfather and Stepchildren as "Le tai van", presumably after its protagonist Lê Thái Vân. Coulet compounds the errors by rendering the title as Lê tân văn and the protagonist's name as "Lê thi Vân". Phương Hữu (item 2) then mistakes the miswritten name as a feminine one and changes the character from a stepfather to a stepmother. A similar error occurs with the December 12th article, "thượng bất chánh hạ tác loạn" which Michel correctly translates as "Quand les supérieurs sont indignes, les inférieurs se révoltent", but Coulet misrepresents as "Quand les supérieurs se révoltent". This mistaken translation of the title is then retranslated back into Vietnamese by Phương Hữu as "Khi những nhân-vật thượng-đẳng khởi-nghĩa". Phương Hữu therefore appears to have based his account wholly off the short paragraph in the introduction of Coulet's popular book, an account which Marr had surely read, but didn't cite. Trần Huy Liệu (item 1), on the other hand, didn't repeat Coulet's errors. It's impossible to

that Diệu didn't go abroad until 1913. Despite these clear discrepancies, Marr claims that this small pagoda "extended organizational contacts to wealthy landowners, eventually reaching into every province of Cochinchina," An incredible claim that should demand extraordinary evidence. Marr here points readers to Coulet, *Les sociétés secrètes en terre d'Annam*, 142–91. for "a discussion of the role of bonzes and their pagodas in diverse clandestine activities in Cochinchina." This page range includes the whole third chapter, and it doesn't mention Gilbert Chiếu a single time. Instead, all Coulet's evidence is gathered from arrests made in the 1916 uprisings. This tendency to retroactively apply principals deduced from a later series of millenarian revolts to the whole of Vietnamese political organization is the central argument of Coulet's book and a prima facie absurdity. Marr's then cites five different passages in Coulet to support a second claim that "assorted amulets, seals, banners and brevets of more local derivation [...] assisted greatly in generating village support for Dong Du [Going East] efforts." Here most of the passages have nothing to do with Gilbert Chieu, and the ones that do mention him do not provide evidence of village support for "Dong Du efforts.": Passage 1. pages 49-73, is a description of various magical amulets seized as part of the 1916 revolts, none of which were claimed to have been used in the Going East Movement; 2. pages 115-116, which describe the ceremonial rites of the Heaven and Earth Society and which are also drawn from the testimonies those accused in 1916; 3. pages 222-229, discusses military appointments, all the evidence for which is taken from the 1916 rebellions, except for a mention of brevet ceremony which was alleged to have taken place at Chieu's hotel on page 228; 4, pages 282-284 is a section where Coulet argues secret societies "have the purpose of adjudicating economically the disputes which arise among its members". Here Chieu is mentioned along with Khuong, then juxtaposed to "secret society" members from 1913 -1916 as having all engaged in a strategy of using businesses as meeting places. As an aside, I imagine most people, even those not currently plotting the overthrow of the colonial regime, used businesses as a meeting place; 5. p295, discusses the types of discontent which Coulet believed drove intellectuals to join secret societies. It doesn't mention Gilbert Chiếu. However, the previous page (294) discusses anti French-propaganda having been read at Chieu's hotels, so perhaps Marr mistakenly cited the wrong page. Even if that is the case, it still is unrelated to magical seals inspiring student travel.

say with certainty, but the fact implies he had access to Louis Marty's later and more comprehensive studies (item 4) and worked from the paragraph which appeared there.

In sum, scholars have accepted the notion that Gilbert Chiếu led a brief anti-colonial campaign in the Vietnamese press, resting their accounts largely on Marr's claim that he published "subtle, yet risky articles on such matters as agricultural aid groups and popular financial cooperatives, even implying support of political insurrections if the government failed to move to alleviate rural problems."⁵⁰² Chapter 6 of this dissertation has shown that Marr's sources misrepresented these articles — with the partial exception of "Stepfather and Stepchildren" — as anti-French and insurrectionary. But how such obvious distortions had become so commonplace remained a mystery. In this chapter I have responded to that challenge by unpacking Marr's citation practices, showing that, in the case of the southern Reform Movement journalism, his supposedly manifold Vietnamese and French sources were copies of a single French colonial police document. The errors in the naming and summaries of those articles showed that neither Marr, nor his Vietnamese sources, nor even the French prosecutors, had read the original documents. Instead, as I argue in the next chapter, the state relied on tendentious denunciations from Gilbert Chiếu's Vietnamese rivals. In this chapter, I show that this series of oversights has obscured the anti-Chinese and pro-business features of the movement, thereby perpetuating a Coulet-Marty framework which foregrounds literati-led secret societies and anticolonial subterfuge. The next section will close the chapter by analyzing the birth of this framework: first set out by Procureur General Michel to rationalize Gilbert Chiếu's acquittal, then formalized by Louis Marty in response to the upheavals of 1916, and popularized in the interwar period by Georges Coulet in *Secret Societies in the Annamese Lands*. Once Coulet's book appeared, the framework escaped the confines of colonial police files and passed into competing nationalist polemics.

The Coulet-Marty Framework: Exilic Literati and Secret Societies

An unreliable founding document: The 1909 Michel Report

The chief primary source document in the Gilbert Chiếu Affair is an April 1909 report from Procureur General Michel to the Governor General summarizing "l'affaire Gilbert Chieu et Consorts".⁵⁰³ One would expect such a summary to focus on the accused's crimes and motivations, but Michel instead narrates a show trial in absentia of Phan Bội Châu and Cường Để.⁵⁰⁴ He makes two kinds of allegations against Gilbert Chiếu. One condemns his "anti-French" publishing record, while the other dismisses his pro-business movement as a front operation for funding student travel to Japan and distributing revolutionary propaganda. I won't repeat the discussion of the press campaign here, except to point out that even the Michel Report contained

⁵⁰² 144

⁵⁰³ NF 8-28(2), Le Procureur General Chef du Service Juiciaire en Indochine, à Monsieur le Gouverneur General de l'Indochine à Hanoi. 28 Avril 1909. Hereafter, "Michel Report". Nouveau Fonds, CAOM

⁵⁰⁴ Chiếu himself isn't mentioned until the 9th page of the 53-page document, and even then, only parenthetically as part of a long summary of Phan Bội Chau's subversive writings to claim that Châu's "des Statuts commerciaux" was the "key to the Chiếu affair". Chiếu isn't mentioned again until page 14, in a transition between an account of the arrest of Vietnamese students in Japan and the incredible accusation that "this case, known as the Gilbert Chieu conspiracy, is not separate from" the Hanoi Poison Plot. The alleged connection is predictably thin: Phan Bội Châu's pamphlets were uncovered among the accused in both incidents. An account of Chiếu's motivations doesn't appear until page 19, where it is alleged that he harbored a "deep hatred for his adopted homeland," that he "saw in this endeavor a source of considerable income," and that "the independence of his compatriots was, for him, a means not an end". The motivations, it should be pointed out, are at odds: was he motivated by greed or hatred?

clear examples of mitigating evidence, which he tendentiously dismissed, and which later commentators have likewise ignored.⁵⁰⁵

Michel alleges that Minh Tan business activities were nothing more than fronts for Phan Bội Châu.⁵⁰⁶ On my reading, his exaggerations are at times extreme. For example, not only does Michel claim Phan Bội Châu was the “key” to understanding the business movement, but he also claims that the word “business” was a codeword for “revolution”. Thus, on page 29 of the report, a shareholder of the Enlightened Renewal Industrial Corporation had sent Gilbert Chiếu a letter commending him for looking after the “education of your compatriots in trades so that they may, later on, compete with foreigners,” and the prosecution counted that letter among the evidence for sedition. The prosecution interprets this obvious reference to the Chinese in an absurdly tendentious fashion typical of the report as a whole: “the terms trades, education, and commerce were coded language meaning ‘preparation for insurrection,’ as defined by Phan Bội Châu himself.” Recall that these men were shareholders in a legally registered and currently operating business. Some of these businesses had French shareholders. The factory produced soap and waged an ongoing price war with Chinese retailers who were attempting to drive it out of business.⁵⁰⁷ The prosecutors were so eager to connect Gilbert Chiếu to Phan Bội Châu that they often overrode their own informants' interpretations whenever they judged them too lenient.⁵⁰⁸

⁵⁰⁵ See chapter six, and the comparison above. There are three significant details of Michel’s account which later commentators ignored. First, Michel states that “propaganda via the press only ceased after a full translation was made, sometime later, by the Chief of the Interpreters’ Bureau, of the article that had appeared in the *Moniteur des Provinces*.” The bureau chief Diệp Văn Cương will be discussed more fully in the next chapter, which reconstructs a narrative of the collapse of the movement. Here it should be noted that, since the last allegedly anti-French article appeared in January, this means the Cương had reported on Chiếu in the earliest months of the magazine, and Cương was probably the one responsible for the misleading translations. Second, Gilbert Chiếu disavowed the articles, saying he “recognized” that the publication of “Stepfather and Stepchildren” was “profoundly regrettable”, and pled ignorance regarding the content of the allegedly subversive articles he published. I, like Michel, found this hard to believe. However, considering the errors in both the titles and summaries of the articles in question, one wonders about the atmosphere of Chiếu’s interrogation—might he have been simply denying the summary accurately depicted the articles, perhaps even under torture? A third detail arises from the second: Nguyễn An Khương, the manager of *Six Provinces News*, produced in his own defense a letter from Gilbert Chiếu which, in Michel’s wording, “formally declared taking responsibility for the articles published by mistake”. This letter was dated to the 4th of October 1907, casting doubt on Khương’s taken for granted “anticolonial” zealotry. The next chapter will discuss how Khương left the magazine just as Chiếu’s enemies began publicly pressing the case against him that Spring. Taken together, these details paint a more ambiguous portrait of Chiếu’s alleged anti-French movement. Vietnamese rivals loom behind the mischaracterized evidence, and Khương from the start had only a half-hearted commitment to the magazine’s political line. While these men certainly aided Vietnamese student travel to Japan, there are sufficient grounds to doubt that such sponsorship implied endorsement of Phan Bội Châu’s most radical statements.

⁵⁰⁶ I show that these allegations are specious for reasons detailed in chapters 6 and 7. To summarize, Gilbert Chiếu’s program was a continuation of that already existing in *Talking Business* since 1901 under Luong Khắc Ninh; he had widespread support among a variety of groups, including Frenchmen and Vietnamese collaborator stalwarts, and sought investment and relationships from the French colons.⁵⁰⁶ Furthermore, the array of services offered at the hotels and the nature of the proposed and actual enterprises reflect a logical, if ultimately insufficient strategy for Vietnamese bourgeois class empowerment over the Chinese. In addition to Japan, Chiếu also advocated and sponsored student travel abroad to France. Though less important, it’s noteworthy that Phan Bội Châu advocated Vietnamese investing alongside the ethnic-Chinese. This should also be taken as evidence that Châu’s was ignorant of the anti-immigrant business movement of the period.

⁵⁰⁷ See the discussion of Enlightened Renewal Industrial Corporation in Chapter 7.

⁵⁰⁸ For example, the report relates how, on February 27th, 1908, the Provincial Governor of Mỹ Tho received a confidential denunciation of Chiếu’s hotels from his “friend and shareholder” the Huyen of Cai Lay, Mr. Ben. The

Taken together, these countervailing details put me in an ambiguous position as I reconstruct the Reform Movement. As discussed in chapter six, Gilbert Chiếu stated his three-pronged strategy in the Reform Manifesto. One of the three prongs was to sponsor Vietnamese students to attend military academies, an early reference to what later became known as the Going East Movement. This manifesto appeared in *Talking Business* before the founding of *Six Provinces News*, and Phát Toan, the Saigon Publishing House discussed in chapter three, later compiled and published it as a standalone pamphlet.⁵⁰⁹ Both media companies have an unimpeachable reputation for colonial loyalism. These facts leave us in an ambiguous position because such Francophile affiliations are paired with Gilbert Chiếu's admiration for Japan. His alias at *Six Provinces News* was Trần Nhật Thăng (Trần Rising Sun), and he extolled the country's military and martial arts, despite occasional criticisms of its colonial attitude and gender norms.⁵¹⁰ Some of his articles are critical of French policies, particularly “Stepfather and Stepchildren,” which rages at the recent dethronement of emperor Thành Thái.

Alongside these verifiable facts run a host of denunciations — some taken from interrogations of the accused, others from Vietnamese rivals with private motivations I take up in the next chapter. These denunciations claim Gilbert Chiếu promoted Phan Bội Châu's writings as part of a surreptitious movement to overthrow the colonial regime. Partially corroborating these accusations of conspiracy are articles in *Six Provinces News* which are difficult to interpret, but do make sense when understood as coded accounts of surreptitious meetings of Going East supporters.⁵¹¹ To reconcile this apparent contradiction, I think it likely that Gilbert Chiếu was an active contributor to Phan Bội Châu's mission, that he was a ‘nationalist’ and that he contributed to “anti-colonial”, or even “anti-French” political activity as part of his broader agenda.

But the Going East Movement was only one dimension of Gilbert Chiếu's tripartite strategy, and ultimately a dead-end. It was a sideshow to the larger business movement that it overshadowed. The prosecutorial exaggeration and threat magnification — i.e. the security services' tendency to inflate the danger in order to justify their own institutional expansion — that characterize the primary sources have driven this misallocation of historical attention. Reading the Michel Report, one is struck by how rhetorically emotive the allegations are, and how out of proportion they seem when compared to the paltry evidence against Gilbert Chiếu. The prosecutors are driven to make the Cochinchinese case commensurate with the Hanoi Poison Plot and Annam tax revolts of 1908, and to compensate for the obvious lack of fit, they exaggerated both the degree of sedition and the breadth of conspiracy. Vietnamese nationalists then inherited these lies and

prosecution against Chieu felt it necessary to add that the denunciation had “misled” the provincial governor about the nature of Phan Bội Châu's pamphlet *Sung Bai Giai Nhon*, which Ben claimed was a “simple heroic poem”, but which Michel claims he had “analyzed and demonstrated its violent nature.” The informant can in no way be construed as someone interested in defending Chiếu, nor as someone who shares Chiếu's commitment to the Go East Movement, seeing as how he had just secretly denounced his hotels. Yet the fact that he is a shareholder casts doubt on the front operation thesis, and that he downplays the revolutionary meaning of certain Phan Bội Châu pamphlets implies that they weren't always seen as militantly anti-colonial.

⁵⁰⁹ Phát Toan owned by pioneer Vietnamese print capitalist Đinh Thái Sơn, see Chapter 3 for a history of this company.

⁵¹⁰ These articles are discussed at length in Chapter 6.

⁵¹¹ See for example the strange article in which he describes himself attending a feast with his own alternate pen names and other “Reformers” [chư vị Minh Tân] who were later implicated in the trial: Gilbert Chiếu, “Tân An”, *Lục Tỉnh Tân Văn* #27, 13; available in Sơn Nam, *Phong trào Duy Tân ở Bắc, Trung, Nam*, 314.

exaggerations, eager to weave an unbroken thread of anti-colonial resistance through a period that was more typified by colonial accommodation.

Michel makes the inadequacy of the allegations against Gilbert Chiếu clear when he walks the Governor General through the rationale for his acquittal. Later scholars have ignored this aspect of the report, restricting their focus to its coverage of “anti-colonialism.” But Michel is clear that there is little evidence Gilbert Chiếu violated any law. He discusses two potential charges, fraud and conspiracy. Regarding fraud, the prosecution weighed two possible legal strategies. The first was to charge those who solicited funds by fraudulently advertising Japan’s support, which they didn’t have. The second was for fraudulently embezzling funds solicited for businesses purposes. In both cases, the prosecution admitted that, although Phan Bội Châu and Cường Đễ could be charged with these crimes, for “those who collected contributions in Cochinchina [...] it cannot be established that they were guilty of fraud or complicity in fraud.”⁵¹² Gilbert Chiếu himself had supported the Eastern Travel students at great personal expense, and had taken out loans from his own companies to fund cash-strapped students. This was a breach of fiduciary trust, and a likely source of his poor reputation among the Vietnamese business community, but the prosecution nonetheless concluded that,

One cannot affirm, and especially not prove, that [Chiếu] saw in the propaganda of anti-French ideas and in the schemes of the so-called Cuong De anything more than an opportunity profitable to his personal interests. One must also note that no complaint for fraud has ever, up to now, been filed against him or any of his co-defendants.

Consequently, and based on the above considerations, the investigation could not identify in the case of Gilbert Chiếu or the other Annamese who appeared alongside him [...] any elements constituting the offense of fraud or complicity in fraud.⁵¹³

Regarding the charge of conspiracy, the prosecution weighed whether Gilbert Chiếu’s actions “constituted either the crime of insurrection with the aim of inciting citizens to civil war, or the crime of conspiracy against the internal security of the State.”⁵¹⁴ Here the charges are even more specious, as Phan Bội Châu’s party was an “association lacking cohesion, lacking unity of vision or means, and whose plans seemed destined to be realized only in a vague future.” The only material evidence against Gilbert Chiếu and the ninety others arrested in Cochinchina are the contradictory statements scattered across Phan Bội Châu’s various pamphlets. Michel regretfully concludes that,

After five and a half months of long and meticulous investigation, it has been impossible to establish that the accused engaged in or even attempted any act of insurrection [*attentat*]. We would claim in vain that an attack was initiated by publishing articles, poems, or brochures—whether through the press or via distribution in the villages of Cochinchina. Indeed, it has been ruled (Paris Court of Appeal and Criminal Court combined – 9 February 1883 – Journal of Criminal Law) that “the act of publishing and displaying a text, regardless of its wording, cannot by itself, in the absence of any material attack, constitute an ‘insurrection’ [*attentat*] in the sense of Article 88.”⁵¹⁵

⁵¹² Michel Report, 44

⁵¹³ Michel Report, 45

⁵¹⁴ Michel Report, 47-51

⁵¹⁵ Michel Report, 51

Thus, despite the prosecution's belief that Gilbert Chiếu's "betrayal is evident," in their own reckoning, his actions didn't fall under the penal code. Once Michel's report is stripped of its exaggerated prosecutorial rhetoric and its patronizing colonial indignation over the insufficient devotion displayed by the subject elite, what remains is the dragnet arrest of ninety individuals and the complete financial and reputational destruction of a man whom no one even alleges committed a crime.

The Gilbert Chiếu Affair as Legal Precedence and Institutional Consolidation

One might expect embarrassed colonial administrators to have swept such a spectacular legal failure under the rug, but the opposite took place. The Gilbert Chiếu case became an important legal precedent and part of an internally circulating threat narrative that justified two administrative moves: the bureaucratic consolidation of the colonial repressive apparatus, and the rollback of a tentative separation of powers in Cochinchina. Ironically, Gilbert Chiếu's role as an object of police fantasy — rather than his effectiveness as a political activist — ensured that the colonial state appended his dossier to subsequent political upheavals, inscribed it in its archival memory, and eventually transmitted it to Georges Coulet for wider publication.

The institutional consolidation that shaped the Coulet-Marty Framework was already under way years before the Reform Movement began. Police intelligence agent Louis Marty played the foundational role in establishing a framework. He was the youngest member of the first cohort of professional, secular, republican and orientalist-trained civil officials.⁵¹⁶ They graduated from the new metropolitan *École Coloniale* at the close of the nineteenth century and converged on Tonkin by 1905. Governor General Paul Doumer's expansionist orientation toward Southern China was administrated through the Bureau of Native Affairs of Tonkin, thereby directing the protectorate's intelligence gathering operations abroad.⁵¹⁷ At this time, the Tonkinese administration coordinated foreign intelligence gathered in France's Chinese possessions, keeping a watchful eye on both domestic issues and Vietnamese expatriates. Their sights remained trained on the perceived enemies of French foreign policy: first the Japanese after the defeat of France's ally Russia at Tsushima in 1905, then the Chinese Republicans whose presence disrupted tense arrangements with the Qing, and later, during the Great War, German meddling via Shanghai and Bangkok. They were already surveilling Phan Bội Châu and Vietnamese emigration to China and Japan in 1905, and the bulk of their work over the first two decades of the century revolved around infiltrating and undermining his associations. By the time the Cochinchinese courts sent out a formal request for evidence to the other Indochinese *pays* as part of the Gilbert Chiếu trial, investigators at the Political Bureau and Bureau of Native Affairs of Tonkin had been compiling dossiers on Phan Bội Châu and Cường Để for three years

It is unclear whether outside agencies consulted with Michel as he formulated his recommendations to the Governor General. But the report concludes with an argument for bringing Cochinchina in line with Tonkin and Annam, and for investing emergency punitive authority in the Governor General to compensate for powers recently lost to the Governor of Cochinchina.

⁵¹⁶ This account relies on the perceptive account of Patrice Morlat. In order of seniority, the key figures are Jules Bosc, Pierre Pasquier, René Robin, Paul Blanchard de La Brosse, Jean Przyluski and, most crucial for our purposes, Louis Marty. Morlat, *Les affaires politiques de l'Indochine, 1895-1923*.

⁵¹⁷ For an account of how Paul Doumer's reign as Governor General from 1897-1902 was a turning point in the development of the Vietnamese Elite, see chapter two.

By 1909, a tentative separation of powers had existed in the south for six years. The Cochinchinese Vietnamese elite eroded the power of the Cochinchinese executive in a landmark lobbying campaign through the Colonial Council, led by *Talking Business* founder Lương Khắc Ninh, who condemned the tyranny of arbitrary detention and demanded the repeal of the so-called “Native Codes” in 1901 and 1902.⁵¹⁸ The debate culminated in their abolition in Cochinchina in 1903, setting the southern colony on a divergent course from the protectorates of Annam and Tonkin, where the administration concentrated powers in the executive out of respect for indirect rule and a politics of “association.”

Thus, while the 6 January 1903 decree abolished the Lieutenant Governor's and provincial administrators' powers to imprison individuals for political crimes arbitrarily in the colony of Cochinchina, an 11 October 1904 decree on the *Indigénat* granted these powers to the Governor General and the Residents Superior in the protectorates of Annam and Tonkin. Governor General Paul Beau at the time requested that this law be extended to Cochinchina, but to no avail.⁵¹⁹

Michel's report views the Gilbert Chiếu case in this legal context, arguing that the attempted separation of powers left a gap in emergency authority that allowed Gilbert Chiếu to squirm free in a way that “compromised our prestige in the Far East and our domination in Indochina.”⁵²⁰ He found legal basis in the decree of 25 May 1881 “regarding the internment of natives and Asiatics,” which justified internment in order to make it “impossible for troublemakers to accomplish their criminal plans.” By juxtaposing these demands with the inflated threats of exilic conspiracy hatched in the Tonkinese offices of Native and Political Affairs, the Michel Report made Gilbert Chiếu's trial a turning point in the homogenization of security frameworks across the three Vietnamese *pays* of Indochina.

From 1909, the security services promoted the exilic meddling framework alongside administrative lobbying that extended executive prerogative — centralizing juridical and police

⁵¹⁸ These are discussed in Chapter 5. That confrontation pitted Ninh and the Cochinchinese Vietnamese high elite of the Council, alongside sympathetic republican leaning Colons who demanded full assimilation to French law as a matter of human rights and universal notions of justice. It was opposed by Lieutenant Governor Lamothe, who claimed to be acting in the interests of the provincial Vietnamese *chefs de canton* who, he argued, demanded the retention of arbitrary executive judicial authority according to an “associationist” maintenance of native customs. In response to the republican demands, Lamothe convened a committee—stacked with his partisans—which returned recommendations for a legal modification that sufficient executive powers. But these modifications were never applied because Lamothe was unexpectedly usurped by the 6 January 1903 decree abolishing the *Indigénat*. Lamothe was transferred to Cambodia, an apparent demotion, and replaced by Rodier, who oversaw, in 1904, the transfer of judicial authority to professional magistrates and the stripping of much punitive power of village notables and *chefs de canton*. See chapter 5 of this dissertation; see also Gojosso, Éric. “Le droit de punir outre-mer : l'exemple de la Cochinchine française (1861-1904)” in *Le droit de punir*, edited by Frédéric Chauvaud. Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2012. <https://doi.org/10.4000/books.pur.113951>.

⁵¹⁹ Paul Beau, *Situation de l'indochine de 1902-1907* cited in Eric Gojosso, “L'indigénat En Cochinchine,” in *Droits de l'homme et Colonies. De La Mission de Civilisation Au Droit à l'autodétermination* (Presses Universitaires d'Aix-Marseille, 2017), 11, <https://hal.science/hal-02388125>.; It is also worth noting that it is precisely this regime, with its arbitrary detention and collective punishments, which was singled out in an explosive speech in the Chamber of Deputies by the socialist deputy de Pressensée- himself invoking Phan Chau Trinh- as the chief cause of political instability in the colony. Michel's report to the Governor General, predictably, takes the opposite position, and recommends the extension of the Annamese and Tonkinese regime of the *indigénat* to Cochinchina, in effect rolling back the hard-won reforms of 1903. Thus, at almost the exact moment French deputies in the metropole were decrying the maintenance of tyrannical authority under the guise of a respect for native customs, figures within the administration were lobbying for its extension.

⁵²⁰ Michel Report, 52-54

powers in the Governor General's offices and pulling them away from the patchwork of investigative and intelligence-gathering operations scattered among the provincial administrators, the lieutenant governor, and the residents. In historian Patrice Morlat's words, after the 1903 abolition of the Cochinchinese law on the *indigénat*, the "suppression of the administrators' discretionary judicial powers left a 'repressive void', which, with Blanchard de La Brosse and with [Jules] Bosc, Albert Sarraut took it upon himself to remedy."⁵²¹ Sarraut convened an Indochina Legislation Commission to this end, and among the "most important" modifications it proposed to native legal status was to "add a paragraph repressing maneuvers and plots against public security in Indochina or of a nature to cause serious troubles, such as the Gilbert Chieu affair."⁵²² The resulting "Modified Penal Code Regarding Annamese" applied first to Cochinchina, then extended to natives or subject Asians whose relations reached other parts of the colonies.

The consolidation accelerated due to the new security threats presented by the 1911 Revolution in China. When Sarraut arrived in 1912, he relied on his trusted clique of Tonkinese police intelligence officers-cum-orientalists—above all Bosc, Blanchard de la Brosse, and Louis Marty—who were at the time based in the Bureau of Native and Political Affairs but managed espionage networks stretching from Tonkin into southern China. During this period of rapid expansion, the organization aimed above all to infiltrate Phan Bội Châu's and Cường Để's networks.

Threats multiplied again at the outbreak of the Great War, with officials adding a new obsession with German sabotage to their focus on Vietnamese exiles and their Chinese patrons.⁵²³ With senior staff members stuck in the metropole, Louis Marty took over intelligence management and, with the close collaboration of his friend and secretary Phạm Quỳnh, gained increasing responsibility. By 1914 he alone oversaw both the political affairs and the native affairs branches of the office. Historian Patrice Morlat summarizes his duties as encompassing "the whole of consular intelligence services abroad, but also of all the indigenous administrative and judicial life of the interior, while helping Jules Bosc in the work of external relations with the other countries of Asia."⁵²⁴ The exilic conspiracy framework thus took shape both in the structure of the bureaucratic office that preceded the *Sûreté Générale*, and in the duties personally invested in its rising star, Louis Marty.

Between his leadership of the Bureau of Political and Native Affairs in 1914 and his founding of Nam Phong with Phạm Quỳnh in 1917, Louis Marty penned two studies that formed the historiographical foundation for the anti-colonial narrative this chapter discusses: "*Note pour contribuer à l'histoire des sociétés secrètes en Indochine*," and "*Note sur l'agitation anti-française depuis 10 ans et le parti nationaliste annamite*." In the second text, first drafted in 1914, Marty centers Phan Bội Châu and Cường Để in a general theory of "anti-French" agitation by linking the exiles retroactively to the 1885 Cần Vương Movement and forward in time to the 1913 Phan Xích Long Bomb Plot, thereby presaging the "secret society" Troubles of 1916.⁵²⁵

Marty wrote the studies for internal circulation, but the security services disseminated them further afield after widespread peasant rebellions caught the Cochinchinese security apparatus

⁵²¹ Morlat, *Les Affaires Politiques*, 124-126

⁵²² Morlat, *Les Affaires Politiques*, 126, cites AOM PA9 Papiers Sarraut: Jules Bosc a Gr GI Saigon, le 10 Aout 1912

⁵²³ Morlat, *Les Affaires Politiques*, 187

⁵²⁴ Morlat, *Les Affaires Politiques*, 190.

⁵²⁵ These reports are also in ANOM- NF8-28(2)

completely off guard in 1916.⁵²⁶ Civilian policing was powerless to stop the rioting, so the administration invoked wartime emergency measures and convened irregular military courts. These tribunals dealt out ferocious repression: they arrested a thousand and summarily executed nearly a hundred by firing squad. The impromptu military tribunals often based punishments on little more than anonymous denunciations, and occasionally sentenced defendants in absentia. False denunciations were rampant, and in at least one case the police mistakenly arrested trusted collaborators on the flimsiest accusations.⁵²⁷ The brutality of the repression worried then-Governor General Roume, who launched an inquest into the cause of the unrest. Roume hoped to prove a connection between Cường Để and Phan Xích Long — a connection the Governor of Cochinchina Gourbeil rejected out of hand.⁵²⁸

Louis Marty modified and disseminated his two influential reports as part of this investigation. Sarraut returned in 1917 convinced that two obstacles plagued Indochinese security. First, the patchwork of police forces suffered from intelligence-sharing and jurisdictional disputes that left them unable to cope with the cunning of professional revolutionaries in exile. Second, the existing professional *Sûreté* was a largely urban — and thus French — phenomenon, ignorant of native social realities. Sarraut, who as a socialist opposed the use of violent irregular repressive measures, reorganized and centralized the colony's policing and intelligence-gathering apparatuses into a regular formal institution, the *Direction des Affaires Politiques et de Sûreté Générale*.

Marty's two reports synthesized ten years' experience of the offices of Political and Native Affairs on the eve of their consolidation into the *Sûreté*. The reports reflect those offices' long-held orientation toward French expansion into Southern China, while also emphasizing Phan Bội Châu's and Cường Để's exilic networks in Japan and Siam. Marty's "*Note sur l'agitation anti-française depuis 10 ans et le parti nationaliste annamite*" became the basis for his later, expanded, and more influential history of the Vietnamese revolutionary movement,⁵²⁹ but his "*Note pour contribuer à l'histoire des sociétés secrètes en Indo-Chine*" is more important here, since it anticipates Georges Coulet's later study.

At only 15 pages, it lacks Coulet's anthropological scaffolding and exhaustive attention to material and ritual culture, but Marty nonetheless foreshadows Coulet's chief point: there is a matrix of secret societies based in ritual magic stretching throughout the colony from time immemorial that can be commandeered by "a political grouping which, at the beginning, might only be comprised of a very small number of individuals, [but which] gradually extends its ramifications throughout the whole country and plunges its roots into every class of society."⁵³⁰ Marty believed the political group steering the 1916 Troubles of Cochinchina to be the "parti

⁵²⁶ Le Gouverneur Générale de l'Indochine à Monsieur le Ministre des Colonies, 22 Février 1916. NF8-28(2) ANOM

⁵²⁷ In one remarkably bumbling case, the deputy village police chief Rai was anonymously and denounced to the Juge d'Instruction at the Tribunal de Chaudoc. He was promptly arrested and humiliated in front of the whole village, destroying his reputation. This despite the fact he was a close and trusted collaborator of the provincial governor. See the letter "A.S. de l'affaire des Sociétés secrètes de Triton" M. Metaireau, Administrateur de la Province de Chaudoc à Monsieur le Procureur Général. 28 Février 1916. 19446 Thông Đốc Nam Kỳ, Trung Tâm Lưu Trữ Quốc Gia II.

⁵²⁸ Morlat, *Les Affaires Politiques*, 234

⁵²⁹ The later expanded series is: Gouvernement Général de l'Indochine, ed., *Contribution à l'histoire Des Mouvements Politiques de l'Indochine Française: Documents* (Hanoi, 1933).

⁵³⁰ "Note pour contribuer à l'histoire des sociétés secrètes en Indo-Chine", 3: NF8-28(2) ANOM

rebelle annamite” controlled by Phan Bội Châu and Prince Cường Để, which, he argued, Gilbert Chiếu first planted in Cochinchina.

Initially, Marty's explanation had little purchase outside the security services. The governor of Cochinchina rebutted the paranoid logic of this explanation point by point. He questioned the opportunistic timing of the investigation, the impossibility of some encounters between alleged conspirators, the over-interpretation of sparse circumstantial evidence. Instead of an exilic conspiracy, the Governor of Cochinchina pointed to signs that the rebellions began over recruitment of “volunteers” for the First World War, and expressed his disbelief at the class compatibility between the 1916 peasant rebels and Cường Để's wealthy followers.⁵³¹ But the Governor of Cochinchina's rebuttals ultimately mattered little because the intelligence services needed the exilic police fantasy to justify the bureaucratic consolidation of the *Sûreté Générale*. Marty's foundational reports updated the portrait of the fantasy, clothing it in inscrutable oriental superstitions and casting it as the enemy of secular, republican, and rational civilization.

I argue the exilic conspiracy framework succeeded because institutional pressure pushed for bureaucratic consolidation of the repressive and intelligence apparatus, and not because it was a persuasive explanation of Vietnamese “anti-colonialism”. The pressure for consolidation is evident in the way even Governor of Cochinchina Gourbeil, who resisted the framework, nonetheless promoted the further consolidation of the security state, arguing that Gilbert Chiếu's acquittal proved the executive's repressive capacity was insufficient.⁵³² Gourbeil failed in his

⁵³¹ Gourbeil's critiques are at times damning. To Marty's claim of Cuong De and Phan Boi Chau involvement, he points out that its suspicious that these Tonkinese police spies hadn't become interested in the Cochinchinese problems of March until the terror attacks on Montgrand and Chapuis in April, and that “the criminal commission which began to sit in Tonkin immediately after the attacks in Hanoi and Thai-Binh does not appear—any more than the judicial service of Cochinchina—to have established any connection between the events in Cochinchina and those in Tonkin, the connection which would follow if they had had as a common instigator Cuong-Đề and Phan Bội Châu, and were in fact two phases of the same conspiracy” [p7]. He also rejects Marty's claim that the discovery of Cuong De printed currency among Cochinchinese, is evidence of a widespread network of rebels. He argues instead that the currency is rare and only to be found among the extremely rich and has moreover never been discovered among any of those arrested in association with the 1916 Troubles or 1913 bomb plot. He finally completely refutes the allegation of a meeting between Cuong De and Phan Phat Sanh. His tone testifies to the extreme incredulity he has toward the whole mode of explanation. “According to the new theory presented to us, Cuong-Đề would have been the instigator and supreme leader of the anti-French movement initiated in Cochinchina in 1913. In support of this theory, it is alleged—first of all—that the initiative for the movement came from an organization secretly formed in Cochinchina and Cambodia by indigenous Annamites in very secretive relation with Cuong-Đề. The named Phan-phat-Sanh, who passed himself off as a son of Ham-Nghi, or even a descendant of the Nguyễn dynasty—which the investigation refuted—would have been chosen by Cuong-Đề to play the role of emperor and supposedly met Cuong-Đề, whom he represented as being Ham-Nghi. No evidence has been provided of any meeting between the false emperor Phan-xich-Long and the so-called legitimate pretender Cuong-Đề. It is therefore difficult to accept this claim. In any case, it is beyond doubt that no such meeting between Phan-xich-Long and Cuong-Đề could have taken place in Cochinchina in 1913. The date given for the Prince's stay in the colony—mid-April to mid-June 1913—does not line up. Phan-xich-Long was arrested by the Phan Thiết authorities on March 22, 1913, two days before bombs were planted in Saigon, six days before the Cholon demonstration.” p10 Regarding the causes of 1916, arguing that “the first indications of agitation [effervescence] had coincided with the putting into effect directives for recruitment” of “voluntary workers and riflemen” for the Great War, and that the “rebels affiliated with Cuong De” were drawn wholly from the “well-off and educated” classes, rather than “naïve peasants”. 24-26. “Au sujet des menées antifranaïse en Indochine” le Gouverneur de Ire classe des Colonies, Gouverneur de la Cochinchine, à Monsieur le Gouverneur Générale de l'Indochine. 5 Avril 1916. NF 8-28 (2)

⁵³² Gourbeil was noticeably stung by Marty's implication of Cochinchinese police and administrative incompetence, that he shifted blame on his own lack of arbitrary punitive power. He even defended himself by recounting the

attempt to combat Marty's framework for two reasons. First, though they diverged on the role of exilic agitators, the rivals agreed that reinstating executive powers of arbitrary detention would serve as a stopgap to the Gilbert Chiếu exception. Second, the Governor General sided with Marty and blamed Gourbeil, to whom he had "expressed his doubts about the insight and vigilance of the Cochinchinese police services and the reliability of their political intelligence."

In May 1916 Governor General Roume sent the whole packet of reports, including a facsimile of Michel's Report on the Gilbert Chiếu Affair, to the Minister of Colonies as the administration's official excuse for failing to anticipate and prevent the Troubles of January. Marty's studies linking "secret societies," Buddhist millenarianism and the Gilbert Chiếu Affair became the centerpiece of the administration's official narrative, with the specter of Phan Bội Châu and Cường Để pulling the strings. Roume shunted blame onto Gourbeil, whose perceptive rebuttals to the concrete facts and to the interpretive mismatch between Gilbert Chiếu's elite business movement and peasant millenarian religious rioting were ignored. The document packet immortalized the Gilbert Chiếu Affair as the opening act of a decade-long anti-French conspiracy, and the institutional structure of the Sûreté Générale crystallized the exilic conspiracy narrative.

Coulet's Orientalist Anthropology as Police Fantasy

Ten years after Marty's exilic conspiracy framework conquered the imagination of the security state, an enterprising French school teacher in Saigon made it the basis for his 1926 book *Secret Societies in the Annamese Lands*.⁵³³ David Marr and R.B. Smith both cited Coulet, and the Human Relations Area Files translated the book into English and archived it as an aid to American counterinsurgency efforts during the war.⁵³⁴ Vietnamese publishers have recently translated it, a sign of its continued relevance.⁵³⁵

Uncritical scholarly reliance on Coulet has perpetuated a mythical version of Indochinese political history, lending too much credence to exoticizing culturalist heuristics built on sensational magical elements. Coulet's anthropology, situated in the intellectual tradition of French orientalism, is criminological in nature: it relies on Marty's security frameworks, and its

"energetic measures" his office had taken to "publicly discredit Gilbert Chieu and his acolytes which, in the absence of judicial sanctions, were obtained by harsh administrative sanctions on their honor and career." Gourbeil also emphasizes at length—citing verbatim his previous reports-- that he had been warning the administration that "the suppression of the Regime of the Indigénat had provoked an evident upsurge of brigandage", that the secret societies "which had for their part completely disappeared after 1882, were attempting to reconstitute in the colony" and that it therefore was "indispensable to give to the administrators, with all needed guarantees, the administrative right to punish deeds which the ordinary tribunes cannot." Among the causes of the "current state of things," Gourbeil placed ultimate emphasis on "the acquittal which had concluded the Gilbert Chieu Affair that was regarded by many of our proteges as proof of our impotence in repressing plots led against our domination. This impotence is real, after the decree of 6 January 1903 has removed all means of administrative action capable of maintaining security and order" (p24-26)

⁵³³ The text was positively reviewed in the colonial press, and his dissertation defense was even celebrated in popular Vietnamese owned Saigonese newspaper. "A la Sorbonne: Un fonctionnaire saïgonnais soutient un thèse sur le théâtre annamite et les sociétés secrètes", *L'Écho Annamite*, 5 mars 1928. 4.

⁵³⁴ These are held in the UC Berkeley Library as part of an assortment of war related microfiche. Georges Coulet, *Secret Societies in the Country of Annam (Les Societes Secretes en Terre d'Annam)*, 62: Coulet—1 G-3 (no date) 1926. AM1 Indochina Vietnamese AM11. Translated from the French by the Human Relations Area Files New Haven, 1952.

⁵³⁵ Georges Coulet, *Hội kín xứ An Nam: sách tham khảo*, with Thanh Xuân Nguyễn and Tín Dụng Phan (Omega, 2019).

source base consists almost exclusively of juridical documents. Despite these problems, Coulet has become a key source for political historians interested in the uprisings of 1916 and Vietnamese “millenarianism” in particular, and in “anti-colonialism” more broadly. I read Coulet's anthropology as a colonial police fantasy developed to legitimize a period of brutal political repression, rather than a reliable analysis of Vietnamese political organizations. A critical use of his work remains possible. But in my reading, Gilbert Chiếu's inclusion in Coulet's rubric of “secret societies” is inaccurate and has distorted views of the character of the Reform Movement, lending what was a largely secular, modernist, and public movement an unwarranted air of esotericism and subterfuge.

As alluded to above, the notion that the Reform Movement recruited through secret-society infrastructure is an artifact of historiographical reliance on Coulet's book, which subsumes Gilbert Chiếu into a sorcery-based peasant order Coulet claims undergirds primitive societies. As I showed in previous chapters, the Cochinchinese elite were hostile to millenarian Buddhism and Chinese secret societies, which they saw as wasteful foreign superstitions imported from abroad. Even if the hostility were feigned, why would believers in magical amulets, prophetic sorcerers, and the imminent return of the Buddha of the Western Peace bother attending military academies in Japan? Why would they fight in print for the modernization of dress and speech, or invest their life savings in vocational centers attached to soap-manufacturing plants and consignment operations in Saigon? Why would mystics propagandize against the Chinese immigrant merchant class and Indian money lenders, instead of evangelizing their faith?

Of all the supposed members of the millenarian strand connecting late nineteenth-century peasant rebellions to the Cao Đài and Hoà Hảo movements, it is noteworthy that only Gilbert Chiếu promoted a politics based on race and business. Meanwhile, the Cochinchinese elite, from Lương Khắc Ninh's founding of Talking Business in 1901 to Bùi Quang Chiêu and the Constitutionals in 1917, consistently promoted a Reform Movement-like program: an anti-Chinese-immigrant, pro-business agenda built through legitimately registered, multi-purpose Vietnamese civil-society organizations. The Reform Movement belongs alongside the latter elite mobilizations, not with the former peasant rebellions.

Part of Coulet's appeal lies in the way he frames contemporary political problems as a struggle between civilizations. His other work sheds light on this feature of his scholarship. Coulet submitted *Secret Societies* alongside a second study, *Annamese Classical Theater*, to earn his Doctor of Letters from the University of Paris-Sorbonne in 1928.⁵³⁶ That the two texts appeared together goes some way to explaining the theatrical and culturalist aspects so prominent in *Secret Societies*, which scholars happy to reference the book as a simple study of political subterfuge have ignored.⁵³⁷ Coulet has purposefully courted this misunderstanding, and his ethnographic limitations clash with the political importance he claims for his ideas.

⁵³⁶ “L’Annam sur la sellette: Un fonctionnaire de l’Indochine soutient une thèse coloniale en Sorbonne”, *Annales Coloniales*, vingt-neuvième année-no.17, 30 Janvier 1928, 1-2; Georges Coulet, *Le théâtre annamite: classique*, 2. éd (Imprimerie Mouton, F. Cabasson, 1928).

⁵³⁷ Smith comments on this structure, complaining that his “study is arranged under a number of analytical headings, such as the role of “sorcerers”, the role of religion, etc., in the various societies, without any attempt at a straightforward chronological and geographical account.” But he doesn’t tease out the full implications. The bulk of *Secret Societies* is not concerned with political organs, but with the description and analysis of symbols and rites. The text is divided into three parts, the first dealing with magic and focusing on the “necessary presence of the sorcerer” which describes efficacious symbols and their uses within the societies. The second part analyzes the role

Coulet claimed that all Vietnamese political subterfuge throughout history has been the product of secret societies, which are a “latent social force” in the “Annamese crowd.”⁵³⁸ His theoretical approach descends from Gustav Le Bon via Paul Giran's *Magie et Religion Annamite*.⁵³⁹ From these two Coulet develops two problems. First, the pathological interaction between individual self-interest and the crowd. Second, an evolutionist taxonomy of primitive societies that locates them on a spectrum among magic, religion, and science. Coulet's innovation is to apply this taxonomy to Vietnamese rural civil society. In doing so, he at times produces valuable analyses of rural organizations and portrayals of the underlying social conditions.⁵⁴⁰ Yet, the fascinating aspects of his study notwithstanding, one must handle the work with care. Its approach is a sympathetic exercise in exoticization, an expression of the progressive wing of colonial ideology that advocated a policy of association over assimilation on the grounds of essential differences between Vietnamese and French national character.

Coulet's text also served practical commercial purposes alongside these abstract theoretical and ideological demands. The text features sensational depictions of a savage and unreasonable rural space to feed the anxieties of the modern, urban and bourgeois readership of the interwar period. It is no coincidence that Vietnamese moderates invoked the text in the late 1920s, as the ready-to-hand frame for the “Blanquist” violence they decried.⁵⁴¹

of religion, rites of initiation and passage, and the moral ideals and Buddhist infrastructure linking societies. The third part discusses the “profane” sociological aspects of these societies, particularly their role in linking classes and communities into political action. Thus, Coulet's main concern throughout the text is in understanding and detailing various ritual practices, the imagery associated with them, and the ideas driving them. This is not unlike his shorter study on the performative and narrative symbology of Vietnamese traditional theater, which similarly moves from the material culture to the character and scenic types to the typical plots. Smith, “The Development of Opposition to French Rule in Southern Vietnam 1880-1940,” 108.

⁵³⁸ For example his claim that all political subterfuge for all Vietnamese history, has been the product of “secret societies.” : En d'autres termes, une organisation secrète, qui porte les troubles comme en puissance, est perpétuellement au point dans la foule annamite: c'est une force sociale latente, qui ne cherche pas précisément une occasion de s'affirmer, mais qui est apte à être canalisée vers n'importe quelle fin, dès que, trop nourrie d'elle-même, elle ressent le besoin d'un exutoire. Qu'un prétexte quelconque lui soit tourni de se dépenser, et la voilà en branle: tous ses rouages jouent. Qu'elle réussisse ou qu'elle échoue, la machine a fonctionné, montrant ses défauts, qu'on corrige et ses qualités qu'on renforce. En un mot, s'il y a toujours eu des troubles dans la société annamite, c'est qu'il y a toujours eu des sociétés secrètes, aussi bien sous les, gouvernements autochtones que sous l'autorité française.” Coulet, *Les sociétés secrètes en terre d'Annam*, 23.

⁵³⁹ In addition to the telltale invocation of “the crowd” Le Bon wrote a preface endorsing Giran's adaptation of his theories to Indochina. Paul Giran and Gustave Le Bon, *Magie et religion annamites: introduction à une philosophie de la civilisation du peuple d'Annam* (Challamel, 1912).

⁵⁴⁰ See for example this passage the first of two conclusions (there are two conclusions) on p373: “Aujourd'hui donc, comme autrefois, à la campagne comme à la ville, elle est formée d'une multitude qui ne possède rien; d'une classe intermédiaire qui ne possède pas grand chose, et dont la possession même reste aléatoire si elle ne l'étend pas; enfin d'une minorité de la fortune ou du pouvoir. Il est logique que ceux qui n'ont rien, tendent à posséder; il est non moins logique que ceux qui possèdent, défendent leurs biens; quant à la moyenne société annamite, elle a le sort de toutes les classes moyennes de l'histoire universelle; dans le conflit qui met aux prises la minorité dont elle vit et la foule dont elle a peur, elle hésite, ne se décidant à choisir le parti qui remporte l'avantage qu'au moment où elle ne lui est plus d'aucun secours. Cette poussée vers le haut exigée par l'égoïsme humain, c'est dans la société secrète qu'elle se matérialise. »

⁵⁴¹ See for example the series of articles by Trịnh Hưng Ngẫu “La genèse de l'effervescence actuelle en Indochine III: Les sociétés secrètes”, *La Tribune Indochinoise: organe officiel du Parti Constitutionnaliste Indochinois*, n.538, 24 Mars 1930.



Figure 8. The illustration of a "sorcerer" in Coulet's *Secret Societies* well communicates the sensational and savage nature of the supposed relations between the Vietnamese rural intellectual and the "crowd". Even if such a figure existed at all, it would be an absurdity to imagine their participation in the Minh Tân Movement discussed in part two of this dissertation.

Theoretical prejudices only go part of the way toward explaining Coulet's reading. In fact, his source base all but precludes any alternate conclusion. If a criminological temptation already inheres in Coulet's adaptation of Le Bon's crowd dynamics, it becomes irresistible because his sources are strictly juridical in nature. Coulet gathered all his findings from court documents pertaining to six different sets of criminal proceedings. The last set, arising from the 1916 Troubles, overshadows the rest in both the number of accused and the bulk of Coulet's references.⁵⁴² The sourcing problem was the central criticism of his work at his dissertation defense at the Sorbonne in 1928.⁵⁴³ The 1916 Troubles cast a shadow over Coulet's

⁵⁴² The first five a largely secondary role in Coulet's account. These are, in chronological order: 1) Judge Delacroix's dismissal of the case against Gilbert Chieu in 1908, 2) the closing arguments (requisitoire) in a case against Chinese secret societies in Long Xuyen in 1909, 3) the indictment and opening arguments from the 1913 bomb plot of Saigon, 4) the closing arguments in the Talung affair of 1915, 5) the closing arguments in the case of the 1916 attack on the central prison of Saigon. The 6th and final set overshadows the rest both in terms of the level of detail and the scope of the crimes. This set is composed of 66 cases-- including riots, looting, assassinations, bomb plots, and other political crimes-- produced during the upheavals of 1916 and collected under the category of the "Cochinchina Troubles." Whereas the first five "affairs" accounted for a total of 316 accused, of which the Gilbert Chieu case alone accounted for 91, the "Cochinchina Troubles" imprisoned 1,440 individuals through emergency wartime military tribunals, many of whom were sentenced to execution in absentia.

⁵⁴³ Note that Marcel Mauss was a member of the jury, as was the linguist Jean Pryzluski, who before 1913 was Louis Marty's superior at the Bureau of Native Affairs, and would have been very familiar with the exilic literati security

understanding of the Reform Movement: he acquired his sources on Gilbert Chiếu as appendices to the dossiers of the 1916 defendants.⁵⁴⁴ Coulet's text is thus half orientalist theorization, half commercial dramatization of the explanations colonial prosecutors and police put forward during the violence of the military tribunals that repressed the 1916 Troubles.

Conclusion

This chapter has challenged the orthodox account of the Cochinchinese Reform Movement by uncovering its foundation in what I call police historiography. I began by showing that the narrative of Gilbert Chiếu as an anti-colonial conspirator rests on a fragile evidentiary base: a single 1909 report by Procureur General Michel, riddled with prosecutorial exaggeration and mistranslation. French colonial scholars and mid-century Vietnamese nationalist historians distorted Michel's errors twice more in transmission, and David Marr reproduced and amplified those errors into the Anglophone canon. In place of the manifold Vietnamese sources Marr cited, I found a closed loop rooted in the colonial security archives.

Peeling back these layers revealed how the historiography has obscured the anti-Chinese, pro-business character of the Reform Movement. Far from being a clandestine appendage of Phan Bội Châu's literati-led exile networks, the Cochinchinese Reformists were the first generation of a new provincial elite bloc: modern bureaucrats and Orchard Heartland notables who embraced colonial governmental structures and market institutions to reclaim commercial space from Chinese and Indian intermediaries. Their program was public and entrepreneurial, not esoteric or conspiratorial. That historians have long read this movement as a precursor to modern anti-colonialism says more about the institutional needs of the colonial police than about the realities of Vietnamese politics in the early 1900s.

The chapter then traced how the exilic conspiracy framework, which Michel articulated, Louis Marty formalized, and Georges Coulet popularized, emerged from the bureaucratic consolidation of the Sûreté Générale during the first two decades of the twentieth century. By reframing the Reform Movement as the southern front of a colony-wide secret-society conspiracy, the security services converted their own investigative failures into justification for expanded powers. This legal and institutional logic explains why colonial administrators memorialized Gilbert Chiếu's acquittal as precedent rather than embarrassment — proof, they argued, of the danger posed by supposed gaps in the security state's powers.

Once Coulet broadcast Marty's framework to a wider colonial public, the framework escaped the confines of the police archives and entered the sphere of Vietnamese political debate. I've mentioned how Vietnamese moderates of the 1920s deployed Coulet's lurid anthropology to portray communism as merely the latest eruption of Vietnam's supposed innate "Blanquism," characterizing their own elite politics as rational and secular by contrast. Other times, the moderates found themselves defending Vietnamese against Frenchmen who wielded Coulet's framework against the moderates' compatriots. Thus, when a M. Bonvicini attacked Caodaism by invoking Coulet, Nguyễn Phan Long jumped to the new religion's defense, pointing out that "in the criticism of [Coulet's] work—which was a doctoral thesis—the jury correctly reproached the

framework. See: "L'Annam sur la sellette: Un fonctionnaire de l'Indochine soutient une thèse coloniale en Sorbonne", *Annales Coloniales*, vingt-neuvième année-no.17, 30 Janvier 1928, 1-2

⁵⁴⁴ A Mr. Đỗ Văn Y for "maneuvers" and Mr. Lê Văn Hồ for "conspiracy". See the table of sources on Coulet, *Les sociétés secrètes en terre d'Annam*, 391–95.

author for placing excessive importance in police reports, which generally inspire a too often justified mistrust.”⁵⁴⁵ Nguyễn Phan Long might profitably level the same criticisms at historians today.

Yet the framework's dubious character did not stop it from appealing to romantic young revolutionaries like Nguyễn An Ninh, who inverted its moral valence. What Coulet had cast as a pathology, Nguyễn An Ninh celebrated, proclaiming to the appellate court that none other than Coulet had inspired his own quixotic attempt to organize “secret societies” in the Orchard Heartland as a barefoot proselytizing wanderer.⁵⁴⁶ Perhaps Phan Văn Hùm, a Trotskyist intellectual and an early associate of Ninh’s who had been a pupil of Coulet, gave Ninh the text.⁵⁴⁷ Whatever the case, Vietnamese nationalists were already enshrining the police fantasy of a timeless subterranean network as part of their founding myth within a few years of Coulet's book's publication.

Because the text subsumed a pantheon of Vietnamese nationalist figures under a single rubric, postcolonial nationalist historians found it ripe for repurposing. In disentangling the Reform Movement from this police mythology, this chapter has sought to recover its contours as a locally rooted, pro-business, anti-Chinese mobilization of the Cochinchinese elite. In doing so, it clears the ground for the next chapter's reconstruction of the collapse of the movement as the product of intra-elite factional rivalries within the nascent south Vietnamese business world.

⁵⁴⁵ Nguyễn Phan Long, “Une victime inattendue du Caodaïsme”, *l'Écho Annamite*, n.1,201, 20 Juin 1928, 1.

⁵⁴⁶ The fact appears in Woodside, *Community and Revolution in Modern Vietnam*, 36; Tai, *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution*, 189. It originates from “Vụ Nguyễn- An- Ninh đem ra giữa toà phúc án Saigon ngày 17 Juillet 1929” *Thần Chung*, no. 148 Saigon, July 18, 1929, p.1.

⁵⁴⁷ Tai, *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution*, 190.

Table 1. Passages on Gilbert Chiếu's journalism

1. <u>Trần Huy Liệu, Cách mạng cần đại Việt-Nam, tập III. 1957. Footnote 1 p27</u> «Luc tỉnh tân văn» do tên Pi-e Giảng-tê (Pierre Jeantet) làm quản lý, Nguyễn Chánh Chiếu làm chủ bút. [...] Chiếu lấy báo làm phương tiện tuyên truyền bạo động. Bài «Khuyến nông» đăng vào số báo ra ngày 17-10-1907 đã kêu gọi dân chúng nổi dậy chống Pháp khá rõ rệt. Bài «Thượng bất chính, hạ tắc loạn» ra ngày 12-12-1907, bài «Hợp quần giữa các đồng bang» cũng biểu lộ ý chỉ chống Pháp, nhất là bài «Nói chuyện thời sự» ra ngày 13-1-1908 có thể coi như lời biên giải vụ đánh trại lính Tây ở Rạch-giá. Cuộc tuyên truyền bằng báo chí đó kéo dài đến khi tân bị thư phòng thông ngôn của Pháp viết một bài báo trong «Tập chí cảnh tỉnh», bài này làm cho bọn Pháp thức tỉnh. Tri phủ Chiếu không thể tuyên truyền theo lối trước nữa.	2. <u>Phương Hữu, Phong Trào Đại Đông Du. 1950 pp28-29</u> Cụ Gilbert hoạt động về mặt tuyên-truyền rất gặt. Ngày từ ngày 17 Octobre 1907 Cụ đã đăng trong báo «Le Moniteur des Provinces» một bài khuyến-khích về nông-nghiệp, trong đó cụ ngụ-ý kêu gọi đồng-bào khởi-nghĩa; ít tháng sau, cụ lần-lượt đăng trong báo «Luc-tỉnh Tân-văn» bài «Lê Tân-văn» trong đó cụ kể chuyện một người mẹ nuôi Lê-thị-Vân hành-hạ các con nuôi để thoả-mãn những nhu-cầu đề-tiền, khà-ổ, toàn-thể bài này có ý bài Pháp hấn-hỏi. Ngày 12 Décembre, Cụ đăng bài hiệu triệu dân-chúng bắt tuân lệnh của nhà cầm-quyền Pháp dưới nhan đề «Khi những nhân-vật thượng-dãng khởi-nghĩa». Sau cùng ngày 13 Janvier 1908 lại thấy trên mặt báo «Luc tỉnh Tân-văn», mà cụ là chủ-bút, một bài tán-dương cuộc tấn-công quân Pháp trong một đồn nọ ở Rạch-giá dưới đầu đề «Sự hô tương phù trợ giữa đồng-bào và bàn về nghĩa hô tương phù trợ» Sự tuyên-truyền của cụ trong tờ «Luc-tỉnh Tân văn» làm cho nhà cầm-quyền Pháp phải chú ý và lo lắng nên chi cụ tạm ngưng không dùng báo-chí để tuyên truyền nữa, cụ quay ra việc doanh thương.
3. <u>Georges Coulet, Les Sociétés Secrètes en Terre d'Annam 1926 p12</u> Enfin, en Cochinchine, la propagande anti-française prend, sous l'impulsion d'un Annamite, naturalisé français et ancien fonctionnaire de l'Administration française, Gilbert Nguyễn thánh Chiếu, un caractère tout spécial. [...] Dès le 17 octobre 1907, Gilbert Chiếu insère dans le « Moniteur des provinces » une exhortation à l'agriculture qui cache, sous ce titre paisible, un véritable appel à l'insurrection. Dans le journal «Luc Tỉnh tân văn» paraît, peu après, un article intitulé Lê tân văn où la France est symbolisée par un père dénaturé, Lê thi Vân, bourreau de ses enfants adoptifs, sur qui il assouvît ses vices les plus éhontés. Puis, le 12 décembre, dans un nouvel article du même journal : « Quand les supérieurs se révoltent » est prônée la désobéissance à l'Administration française. Enfin, le 13 janvier sous le titre « Solidarité entre compatriotes et causerie sur la solidarité » le même journal vante les exploits de quelques malandrins qui avaient tenté de massacrer une petite garnison française dans un poste de Rach-giá, en Cochinchine. Comme cette propagande, écrite et ouverte, éveille les inquiétudes du Gouvernement français, Gilbert Chiếu fait taire le <i>Luc tỉnh tân văn</i> dont il est le rédacteur en chef.	4. <u>(Louis Marty) Sûreté Générale, L'Agitation Antifrançaise dans les Pays Annamites de 1905 à 1908, Tome I. GGI 65514 p88</u> Succédant à l'article : "Exhortations à l'agriculture", qui cache, sous ce titre paisible, un véritable appel à l'insurrection et qui fut inséré le 17 octobre 1907 au Moniteur des provinces, parut au "Luc tỉnh tân văn" l'article "Lê-tai văn". La France y est personnifiée par un être symbolique du nom de "Lê tai văn" père malfaisant, tourreau des indigènes de l'Indochine, ses enfants d'adoption. Lê-tai-văn a tous les défauts, toutes les corruptions, tous les vices contre nature." Puis parurent successivement "Quand les supérieurs sont indignes, les inférieurs se révoltent" (12 décembre 1907), "Solidarité entre compatriotes et causerie sur l'actualité" (23 janvier 1908). Ces articles sont nettement anti-français, et le dernier surtout est l'apologie du massacre de la garnison française de Rạchgia. La propagande par la voie de la presse ne prit fin que par la traduction intégrale faite, quelque temps après, par le Chef du bureau des interprètes, d'un dernier article paru au "Moniteur des Provinces". L'inquiétude du Gouvernement une fois éveillée, il eût été dangereux pour Gilbert Chiếu et ses acolytes, de continuer, sur un mode aussi agressif, leur campagne anti-française.
5. <u>Annexe au Rapport 2t du 22 Fevrier 1916. "Note sur l'agitation anti-française depuis 10 ans et la parti nationaliste annamite" (Louis Marty) NF 8 28(2). (originally written in 1914) p29</u> Cuong-De était en effet entré en relations avec un aigrefin de haut vol, le nommé Nguyen-Thanh-Chieu, dit Gilbert Chieu, de Rach-Gia, qui, en très peu de temps, réussit à former un important comité de propagande en Cochinchine. C'est ce comité qui envoya au Japon la plupart des étudiants cochinchinois qui s'y trouvaient en 1908 et 1909.	6. <u>Procureur General (Michel) à GG- NF 8 28(2). 1909. pp24-25</u> Succédant à l'article : "Exhortations à l'agriculture", qui cache, sous ce titre paisible, un véritable appel à l'insurrection et qui fut inséré le 17 octobre 1907, au Moniteur des Provinces, paru au "Luc Tỉnh Tân Văn", l'article "Le tai van", la France y est personnifiée par un être symbolique du nom de "Le tai van" père malfaisant, bourreau des indigènes de l'Indochine, ses enfants d'adoption. Lê tai Van a tous les défauts, toutes les corruptions, tous les vices contre nature. [...] Puis parurent successivement "Quand les supérieurs sont indignes, les inférieurs se révoltent" (12 décembre 1907); "Solidairement entre compatriotes et causerie sur l'actualité" (23 janvier 1908). Ces articles sont nettement anti-français, et le dernier surtout est l'apologie des massacres de la garnison française de Rachgia.[...] La propagande par la voie de la presse ne prit fin que par la traduction intégrale qui fut faite, quelque temps après, par le Chef du Bureau des Interprètes, de l'article paru au "Moniteur des Provinces". L'inquiétude du Gouvernement une fois éveillée, il eût été dangereux pour Gilbert Chieu et ses acolytes, de continuer, sur un mode aussi agressif, leur campagne anti-française

The Collapse of Reform, Part Two – The Movement’s Three Vietnamese Enemies.

The previous chapter demonstrated the role of "police historiography" in distorting perceptions of the Minh Tân Movement. It described a narrative framework shaped by the institutional needs of colonial intelligence services and subsequently adopted by nationalist historians seeking to construct an unbroken history of anticolonial resistance. This politicized framework exaggerated the significance and impact of student travel to Japan and downplayed or ignored Minh Tân’s most salient features. These included its anti-Chinese business agenda, its complex, ambiguous relationship with the political and economic project promoted by leading French colons, and its deep roots in the economic anxieties of the Orchard Heartland gentry.

The mischaracterization of the Minh Tân Movement began with prosecutorial documents like the report penned in 1909 by prosecutor Michel, who reacted to the shocking Hanoi poison plot and the Annam tax revolts of 1908 by shoehorning largely unrelated Cochinchinese events and developments into a slightly older threat-narrative centered on the anti-colonial Annamese scholar-gentry, Phan Bội Châu. But in fact, the so-called Gilbert Chiếu Affair was less a revolutionary movement than an egregious case of police overreach inspired by colonial intelligence operations in southern China, which were run out of the Tonkin Bureau of Native Affairs. French officials released Gilbert Chiếu, but instead of acknowledging their error, they pursued further securitization owing to their persistent anxiety over Phan Bội Châu.

The Gilbert Chiếu story became part of the founding myth for the General Security Service [*Sûreté Générale*]. The Great War was a turning point. Stunned by the scope of the “1916 Troubles” in Cochinchina, the energetic intelligence officer Louis Marty synthesized the manifold threats facing the colonial establishment into a single narrative.⁵⁴⁸ A series of influential reports he produced on the threats institutionalized a myth linking Chiếu to a network of "secret societies" supposedly steered from abroad by exiled dissidents. The extensive subterranean reach of these enemies of the state justified the centralization of police powers under the General Security Service.

This narrative evolved further in the mid 1920s, in response to the growth of a new wave of left-leaning anti-French political movements. A schoolteacher named Georges Coulet added orientalist sentiments and a flair for the dramatic to the police documentation, penning the sensationalist, widely read “Secret Societies in the Annamese Lands.”⁵⁴⁹ Soon after its release in 1926, this text was acclaimed as the key to understanding a highly pathologized culture of Vietnamese anti-colonialism. By the early 1930s Vietnamese communism had become the hobgoblin of the colonial security state, and it fit easily into Coulet’s spin on Marty’s framework. Vietnamese moderates used Coulet to paint Communist subversion as a new manifestation of an old national tendency toward Blanquism.⁵⁵⁰ Ironically the book’s misguided use as a counter insurgency reference tool outlasted the colony itself: the Americans commissioned a translation

⁵⁴⁸ “Note sur l’agitation anti-française depuis 10 ans et le parti nationaliste annamite” and “Note pour contribuer à l’histoire des sociétés secrètes en Indo-Chine”, in ANOM- NF8-28(2)

⁵⁴⁹ Coulet, *Les sociétés secrètes en terre d’Annam*.

⁵⁵⁰ Trịnh Hưng Ngẫu “La genèse de l’effervescence actuelle en Indochine III: Les sociétés secrètes”, *La Tribune Indochinoise: organe officiel du Parti Constitutionnaliste Indochinois*, n.538, 24 Mars 1930.

of the book into English as part of their efforts to defeat the Viet Cong between 1954 and 1975.⁵⁵¹

But once out in the world, the Coulet-Marty framework was pirated by rival political forces. The notion of a naturally conspiratorial political culture appealed to anti-colonial activists romantically disposed to revolutionary action. Even before the end of the decade, Coulet's account came to be seen as an instruction manual for the young political agitator Nguyen An Ninh.⁵⁵² Meanwhile colonial hegemony, fraying at the end of the Great War, was threadbare by the mid 20s, and by the 30s was tearing apart at the seams. By the end of the Second World War, national independence was a foregone conclusion, and the old "secret society" vices had been revalued as virtues. In this context, Vietnamese nationalist historians reclaimed Coulet for a history of anticolonialism, transforming the colonial police discourse into the heroic register of a national epic. In the case of Gilbert Chiếu, this involved inflating a minor subplot about his links to the Go East Movement while downplaying his project's bourgeois, anti-immigrant character. Once fixed as a minor subplot to the Phan Bội Châu story, it burrowed into post WWII Anglophone scholarship, and in the case of its most important historian, David Marr, in full and explicit sympathy with the Communist leadership of the Vietnamese nationalist movement.

My interpretation of the historiography suggests that the conventional periodization of Vietnamese nationalism—with its emphasis on scholar-gentry revolutionaries and secret society networks—owes too much to colonial police categories and too little to an understanding of the local historical dynamics that gave rise to it. The Minh Tân Movement, when examined through its own publications and institutional activities, appears less as a stage in the development of "anticolonialism" than as an early manifestation of what would later crystallize as the Constitutionalist Party: a program of Vietnamese bourgeois reformist nationalism through legal civil society development, often in close collaboration with the colonial state, and initially through economic competition with Chinese and Indian immigrants.

Thus far I have highlighted discrepancies in the Chiếu narrative, arguing they have systematically obscured local dynamics in pursuit of a prosecutorial fiction. A reconstruction of Chiếu's spectacular downfall that foregrounds the local dynamics is still missing. There are two obstacles to the production of such a counter-narrative. First, the archival materials were produced as part of the process of prosecuting Chiếu and strengthening the security agencies. The criticism of the police narrative that I have advanced, while warranted, doesn't provide a counter archive which could serve as the factual basis for a reconstruction of events. Second, Gilbert Chiếu did support the Go East Movement, and those connections were ultimately decisive for his downfall. The exilic conspiracy framework is a serious exaggeration, but not a pure fabrication. A purely "local" explanation of Chiếu's collapse which didn't account for his Go East connections would therefore be similarly misleading.

⁵⁵¹ These are held in the UC Berkeley Library as part of an assortment of war related microfiche. Georges Coulet, *Secret Societies in the Country of Annam (Les Sociétés Secrètes en Terre d'Annam)*, 62: Coulet—1 G-3 (no date) 1926. AM1 Indochina Vietnamese AM11. Translated from the French by the Human Relations Area Files New Haven, 1952.

⁵⁵² Woodside, *Community and Revolution in Modern Vietnam*, 36; Tai, *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution*, 189. It originates from "Vũ Nguyen- An- Ninh đem ra giữa toà phúc án Saigon ngày 17 Juillet 1929" *Thần Chung*, no. 148 Saigon, July 18, 1929, p.1.

Nevertheless, internal divisions within the elite are a plausible foundation for such a counter narrative. Evidence that the certain members of the Cochinchinese Vietnamese elite played a pivotal role in Gilbert Chiếu's rapid fall from grace are scattered throughout both the archival and journalistic materials. These materials remain partial and inconclusive, but the evidence is sufficiently compelling to warrant discussion. More generally, Vietnamese opposition to the reform movements of 1908 has been ignored, because of an imperative felt by both colonial police and anti-colonial activists to reduce all political conflicts to a contest between colonized and colonizer. The material presented in this chapter paint a messier picture. The Gilbert Chiếu Affair was a clash of political dynasties and personal feuds that intersected with ideological projects in indeterminate and unexpected ways.

My reconstruction of this story focuses on the conflict between Minh Tân Movement and three powerful anti-Minh Tân elites who campaigned for Chiếu's downfall. First is chief of the interpreters' bureau, Diệp Văn Cương. As *de facto* censor of the Vietnamese press, he worked within the administration to undermine Chiếu. Diệp Văn Cương was probably the one who submitted the purposefully deceptive article translations which have subsequently plagued the scholarship. I will make the case that Gilbert Chiếu alienated Diệp Văn Cương by publishing criticisms of French interactions with the Vietnamese court which personally implicated Diệp Văn Cương's previous work experience. Second is Trần Bá Thọ, son of the notorious collaborator Trần Bá Lộc. Gilbert Chiếu went out of his way to pick a fight with Thọ over abuse of his father's legacy, and Thọ pursued a vendetta against him in response. Third is the Lê Văn Trung, the future first pope of the Cao Đài movement, and a man strongly opposed to the movement's anti-traditionalist currents. All three of these men were closely tied to the Governor of Cochinchina and were well placed to mobilize the administration against Gilbert Chiếu.⁵⁵³ Furthermore, all three were firmly rooted in the clerical elite of Gia Định Core, and their opposition to the Minh Tân Movement should be read as the first great factional clash between the older colonial loyalists and the more recently rallied rural officials of the Orchard Heartland.

Diệp Văn Cương— Chiếu alienates key bureaucrats

The first figure to oppose Minh Tân had the least clear motivations, but his complicated background reveals tensions with upstart elites like Chiếu. According to his biographer Nguyễn Liên Phong, Diệp Văn Cương was from An Nhơn village, in Gia Định.⁵⁵⁴ He was rumored to have come from a poor Hainanese family. French educated, he quickly rose to the highest ranks for native clerks of the colonial state. While Nguyễn Liên Phong claims mistakenly that he was educated in France, evidence suggests that he, in fact, studied in Algiers. Strong corroboration is found in Nguyễn Trọng Quản's 1887 short story "Thầy Lazaro Phiền"—the first known modern short story written in Vietnamese—which was dedicated to "Diệp Văn Cương and to my dear

⁵⁵³ At the start of the Minh Tân Movement in 1907, Lê Văn Trung and Diệp Văn Cương were both on the Colonial Council. They served alongside Trần Bá Diệp. Unfortunately, I've been unable to confirm whether Trần Bá Diệp was related to either Trần Bá Lộc or his son Trần Bá Thọ. If so, it would further institutionalize the connections between the three opponents of Minh Tân. Two years earlier Trần Bá Diệp was elected vice president of the council, the first and only Vietnamese until Bùi Quang Chiếu's scandal-causing run in 1935. Diệp was immediately forced to step down by enraged settlers, led by Eugène Cuniac who carried the recently deceased mayor Paul Blanchy's torch as representative of settler resentment toward the colonial administration. See "La Vie Indochinoise", *Les Annales coloniales : organe de la "France coloniale moderne"*, Sept. 2, 1916.; "Une dernier mot sur l'éligibilité des Annamites à la Présidence du Conseil Colonial", *Le Populaire d'Indochine. Hebdomadaire politique et littéraire du Dimanche*, Nov. 15, 1935, 5.

⁵⁵⁴ Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Điếu Cổ Hạ Kim Thi Tập*, 155.

Annamite friends and former classmates at the lycée d'Algers".⁵⁵⁵ He returned to the colony to teach at its top school, Chasseloup Laubat in the mid-1880s. Upon Trương Vĩnh Ký's retirement, Diệp Văn Cương was brought to Annam by Governor General Paul Bert to replace Ký as the personal tutor to Emperor Đồng Khánh.

Diệp Văn Cương's role at the court became controversial in 1889, when he meddled behind the scenes to influence the selection of Thành Thái after Đồng Khánh's death. Nguyễn Liên Phong's biographical entry strikes a neutral tone, crediting Cương with clarifying matters for the Resident Superior when the grand mandarins could not agree.⁵⁵⁶ Contemporary accounts told a more damning story. Rival factions in the royal entourage had enrolled Cochinchinese interpreters as their agents, and Cương, backing the line that produced Thành Thái, was accused of bullying the mandarins by threatening French intervention. He then used his court access to take the child emperor's young aunt, princess Thiện Niệm, as a second wife.⁵⁵⁷ Denunciations of Cương written by secretive agents of the court and published in the French press went as far as to accuse him of raping the queen mother.⁵⁵⁸ The scandal was severe enough to trigger the wholesale expulsion of

⁵⁵⁵ The dedication continued, "Do you still remember, dear friends, those charming holiday evenings, when free for an hour, we would stroll through the half-moonlit paths of the Marengo garden? Do you still remember that in those same paths, a forbidden cigarette at our lips, we went along dreaming aloud of a brilliant future of enlightenment, progress, and civilization for our dear Cochinchina? Well then! Dear friends! May this modest work that I dedicate to you be a beginning of the realization of those old dreams. But if, against my hopes, it does not reach that goal, accept it nonetheless as a token of the warm friendship of your old companion in voluntary exile." Trần Nhật Vy, *Văn Chương Sài Gòn 1881-1924*, 54.

⁵⁵⁶ "When the King died, the grand mandarins conferred on his succession. There was disunity, so Diệp Văn Cương explained matters clearly for the Resident Superior and mandarins. They immediately coronated the child of Cung tôn Huệ Hoàng đế, who was Thành Thái, to the throne." Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Điều Cỗ Hạ Kim Thi Tập*, 155.

⁵⁵⁷ The most provocative account appeared in an 1892 article in the *Courrier d'Haiphong*, citing "well-informed mandarins." Two Cochinchinese interpreters, Lê Duy Hinh and Diệp Văn Cương, had been enrolled by rival factions in the royal entourage: Hinh's faction favored Prince Cảnh's line, later culminating in Cường Để; Cương's faction favored Dục Đức's line, whose heir apparent was the child Nguyễn Phúc Chiêu — that is, Thành Thái. The author saw Cương's subsequent marriage to Thiện Niệm as a degrading pollution of the royal bloodline, stating that "from that time forward, Cương — a Chinese-Vietnamese métis from Hainan, a former servant and buffalo herder [...] became the uncle by marriage of the emperor of Annam." The allegations went further: Cương was said to have molested [chiffoné] Thành Thái's mother, resulting in a pregnancy which "thanks to the almighty Buddha's intervention" ended in a miscarriage. Fearful that these maneuvers aimed to usurp the throne, the mandarins denounced the scandal to the Resident Superior, and all three Cochinchinese clerks — Hinh, Cương, and Cương's brother Diệp Văn Mang — were removed from the court and replaced by locally trained Annamese interpreters. The sensational aspects of this tale should be read against the labyrinthine factionalism of the late Nguyễn court, a full accounting of which falls outside the scope of this study. However, that Cương and the other Cochinchinese interpreters in the palace took wives from the royal family and were removed from interpreters' service in Annam is not in doubt. Hinh, for example, impregnated princess Đồng Xuân, leading to her family's disgrace; he was subsequently accused of meddling to usurp Thành Thái as well as corruption, and removed. Diệp Văn Mang also requested to wed a princess but was transferred from Huế to Nha Trang and died mysteriously on the way. For the original article see: "Huê", *Courrier d'Haiphong*, July 10, 1892; It is reprinted as part of the article "Diệp Văn Cương, trăn thủ độ thứ hai trại triều đình Huế cuối thế kỷ XIX?" in Hứa Hoàn, *Nam Kỳ: Những Phú Hộ Lừng Danh* (1999), 248.; Brière Jan. 25, 1897 report to Doumer, CAOM, GGI 9619/39, cited in Vũ Ngự Chiêu, *Các vua cuối nhà Nguyễn, 1883-1945*, 694.

⁵⁵⁸ The French Resident suspected that Hoàng Cao Khải and Nguyễn Trọng Hợp, who represented the interests of Tonkinese mandarins agitating for Hàm Nghi's return from exile, were behind the press attacks. But the Catholics Ngô Đình Khả and Nguyễn Hữu Bài were also suspected of involvement to support Annamese interpreters over Cochinchinese interlopers and repair the image of the Cảnh line. When the colonial administration turned against Thành Thái in 1907, both Khả and Bài, along with the Missions Étrangères, become the king's strongest backers. Indeed Khả, father of Ngô Đình Diệm, oversaw Thành Thái's royal guard—the organization later accused of the

Cochinchinese interpreters from Huế. Diệp Văn Cương left the imperial capital in 1890 with a reputation as a craven, abusive, and sexually deranged French lackey — a reputation that would matter enormously twenty years later.

Back in Cochinchina, Cương worked at the Interpreters Bureau and was assigned to manage Chasseloup Laubat. He also tried his hand at journalism, editing *Gia Định Báo* before founding the short-lived *Phan Yên Báo* (1897).⁵⁵⁹ Most consequentially, the Governor General tasked him with overseeing informal censorship of the Vietnamese-language press. According to a memoir written by a subsequent editor of the magazine, Cương's meticulousness in this role so irked *Talking Business's* founding chief editor Lương Khắc Ninh that he resigned, and Gilbert Chiêu was brought on to replace him.⁵⁶⁰ Thus Diệp Văn Cương would have been well aware of the heated debates and provocative articles Chiêu published in the pages of *Six Provinces News*.

While Cương's attempt to weave himself into the Vietnamese monarchy ended in scandal, his turn to print capitalism didn't fare any better. Between 1897 and 1903, he borrowed heavily from princess Thiện Niệm and then from an Indian moneylender named Sidambaramchetty, using his wife as cosigner, to cover debts he could not repay.⁵⁶¹ When the creditor sued in 1901, the courts held the princess liable; when she travelled to Saigon to confront him, he avoided her for two months before sending word that "she was no longer his wife." She in turn sued him for \$10,572 piasters and attached his own letters to the court as evidence. By the mid-1900s, Cương was a man of official rank but stalled ambitions. Rejected as an uncultured provincial upstart by the old elite, ruined financially by a public lawsuit, he depended on the continued favor of the colonial administration.

Several aspects of Diệp Văn Cương's background set him against the Minh Tân Movement in 1908. He was a French educated colonial bureaucrat and tied to the first generation of "collaborators" who rallied to the France rather than to the later accommodating Orchard Heartland elites represented by Gilbert Chiêu.⁵⁶² His marriage alliance with the family of Lương

most brutal of the King's excesses. Other strong backers in the court were the queen mother Từ Dũ, along with the regent Nguyễn Thân and a royal son-in-law trained in Algeria, Thân Trọng Huề. The two lineages rose to power during the Second Indochina War. Huề was grandfather to Trần Lệ Xuân, while Khả to Ngô Đình Nhu. Vũ Ngự Chiêu, *Các vua cuối nhà Nguyễn, 1883-1945*, 731.

⁵⁵⁹ Cương had married princess Thiện Niệm in 1889, the first year of the reign. She kept contact with him after his 1890 transfer and bore him a son in 1893 — the future nationalist journalist Diệp Văn Kỳ. Mother and child remained in Huế while Cương lived with his first wife and daughter in Gò Vấp, near Saigon. His daughter from that first marriage married into the family of Lương Văn Núi. "Diệp Văn Cương, trăn thủ độ thứ hai trại triều đình Huế cuối thế kỷ XIX?" in Hứa Hoành, *Nam Kỳ: Những Phú Hộ Lừng Danh*, 252; Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Điều Cổ Hạ Kim Thi Tập*, 155.

⁵⁶⁰ Lê Hoàng Mưu, "Un Hương Nhắc Lại Bốn Mươi Năm Xưa."

⁵⁶¹ According to the princess's 1903 letter to the Governor General, Cương's mother delivered her a letter from Cương in 1897 claiming he would soon be transferred back to Huế and requesting \$7,000 to repay his debts so that he could avoid a disgraceful lawsuit. He offered to repay her \$200 each month and to put up his property as collateral. She did not take the property, considering it her conjugal duty to help him, and borrowed from within her networks to procure him \$5,000. Cương then approached Sidambaramchetty for an additional \$5,000, for which she cosigned. In 1901, Resident Auvecque subpoenaed her to notify her that the courts had found her liable, and that the balance of \$5,572, exceeding her assets, would require her to liquidate her properties. When she travelled to Saigon to confront him, Cương avoided her for two months before sending his mother with the message that "she was no longer his wife." She then sued him for the full \$10,572, attaching his original 1897 letters as evidence. The letters are reprinted in Hứa Hoành, *Nam Kỳ: Những Phú Hộ Lừng Danh*, 256.

⁵⁶² See chapter three of this dissertation for a discussion of these different fractions of the political bloc.

Văn Núi, the *Đốc phủ sứ* and lumber magnate from Biên Hoà who had been a fixture of the Colonial Council since its inception, bound him to the entrenched bureaucratic establishment. And his censor's portfolio made him personally responsible for whatever appeared in the *quốc ngữ* press. A Hainanese-Vietnamese background might, on paper, have predisposed him toward sympathy with Chinese commercial interests that the movement attacked, but this mattered little in practice: Chiếu himself was also allegedly métis, and aside from a dispute in the French press in 1905, his identity was no obstacle to an alliance with non-métis Vietnamese counterparts in a campaign against Chinese merchants.

Despite his checkered background, Diệp Văn Cương emerged as the pivotal Vietnamese agent in the case against Chiếu, mentioned three times in the Michel report.⁵⁶³ First, he supposedly received a copy of Phan Bội Châu's *Á tế á* with a message urging him to invest in establish commercial enterprises and submitted it to the authorities, signaling his early opposition to the movement. Second, Michel credits Diệp Văn Cương with translating the Vietnamese documents that framed the case, meaning he was the one who produced the tendentious renderings of newspaper articles that would subsequently color the historiography.⁵⁶⁴ Third, the report claims that the 'anti-French' articles ceased after the "Chief of the Interpreters Bureau" translated the article "that had appeared in the *Moniteur des Provinces*" and alerted the French. Since none of the articles the prosecution identified as anticolonial were published after February 1908, Diệp Văn Cương was probably already intervening against the movement at the start of the year, only three months after the founding of the *Six Provinces News*.

Yet, a man ruined by foreign moneylenders might be expected to sympathize with a movement whose goal was to destroy foreign commercial power. That Cương instead worked to destroy it may speak to a personal feud as much as factional loyalty. Recall that in December 1907, Chiếu published "Stepfather and Stepchildren," an article that allegorized Thành Thái's deposition as a generational story of French child sexual abuse.⁵⁶⁵ While Cochinchinese prosecutors would cite it repeatedly as evidence of Gilbert Chiếu's revolutionary intentions, Diệp Văn Cương may have read it as a personal attack. After all, he had brought Thành Thái to the throne in 1889 amid his own sexual scandal, taking a second wife from the royal harem in the process. Gilbert Chiếu had, perhaps even intentionally, written Diệp Văn Cương's reputation back into print.⁵⁶⁶ A man already infamous for pettiness and double-dealing, Cương had both motive and means for retaliation.

These factional characteristics bring us to the second motivation for Chiếu's rejection by important figures in the Vietnamese elite. Gilbert Chiếu, unlike Diệp Văn Cương, was not a member of the first-generation colonial elite who had made their names by supporting the French conquest and the subsequent counterinsurgency in Annam, Tonkin, and Cambodia. He

⁵⁶³ See chapter nine for a discussion of the "Michel Report." ANOM- NF8-28(2), 3, 8, 25. He may also be referred to by Louis Marty as one of the "native interpreters and executive agents of too mediocre honesty and knowhow" who ruined the case against Chiếu. See: "Note sur l'agitation anti-francaise depuis 10 ans et le parti nationaliste annamite", ANOM- NF8-28(2), 31.

⁵⁶⁴ "Michel Report." ANOM- NF8-28(2), 6.

⁵⁶⁵ See chapter six for a full discussion. See: La-ma Hoà-thượng "Cha ghê con ghê" *LTTV* 4, Dec. 5, 1907, 10.

⁵⁶⁶ One possibility is that Chiếu's extraordinary combativeness drew its energy from the sharp attacks on the administration's relations with the crown then being published by the Catholic-aligned *L'Avenir du Tonkin*, a publication Chiếu had himself written for years before. Whether or not he was inspired by its acerbic tone, Chiếu appears to have miscalculated his own position as a naturalized French citizen, treating the license extended to French Catholic polemicists as though it extended to him — and alienating in the process the more august faction of the Cochinchinese Vietnamese elite whose careers had been built on the savagery of the conquest.

represented instead a business-minded upstart faction rooted in the canton chiefs and village notables of the Orchard Heartland and far west — a cohort that accommodated the French presence late and did so under the promise of the *mise en valeur*. The case of Trần Bá Thọ shows what happened when that faction's most outspoken representative confronted the entrenched military-administrative stratum directly.

Trần Bá Thọ -- Revenge of the Old Guard

No figure better represents the privileges and aspirations of the Cochinchinese Vietnamese elite who inherited their prestige from military and administrative service to the French during the first decades of colonial rule than Trần Bá Thọ. Thọ was the son of Trần Bá Lộc, one of the earliest and most energetic Vietnamese collaborators to the French. His military contributions proved crucial not only for the conquest of Cochinchina in the 1860s but for the suppression of revolts in Cambodia, anti-bandit and anti-Buddhist counterinsurgency campaigns in the far west of the Delta, and even the so-called "Scholars' Revolts" in distant Annam. No figure better embodies the Vietnamese Christian defectors who built successful careers by vengefully prosecuting the colonial mission against their erstwhile oppressors.

But Lộc's son didn't share his father's taste for martial glory. Thọ studied in France and, upon his return, followed the established civilian path of the Interpreters Bureau.⁵⁶⁷ He quickly moved up the honorary ranks -- from district chief [*huyện*], province chief [*tri phủ*], inter-province chief [*đốc phủ sứ*], to commander general [*tổng đốc*]--a comically high rank capping a series of deceptively named roles that corresponded to no territorial jurisdictions, and that above all expressed French appreciation for his father's accolades. Thọ traded military valor for cultural, economic, and political status. On the Colonial Council he fought for a raise in wages for Vietnamese colonial clerks. He was also noted for his Confucian sensibilities. He published two poetry anthologies in Nom and was described as a talented lutist. His literary and political pursuits were supplemented by a business attitude that mirrored his father's swashbuckling military adventures.

But Trần Bá Thọ's true power came neither from artistic reputation, nor business acumen, nor elected offices, but rather from his vast kin alliance networks. His two brothers, Trần Bá Hựu and Trần Bá Tường, both sired powerful and high-ranking Orchard Heartland gentry families, and maintained large estates in Mỹ Tho and Cần Thơ.⁵⁶⁸ Thọ himself had two wives, the first birthed six girls and two boys before she passed, the second birthed six more boys. These children in turn wed into a *who's who* of Cochinchinese noble families, providing a rare glimpse into the way such marriage strategies cemented alliances between the colony's elites. His eldest daughter married the son of a first rank interpreter at the Tribunal of Ben Tre, another married a clerk in the Second Office of the Secretariat in Saigon, a third married an interpreter at the Vĩnh Long provincial government. Another married Trương Vĩnh Tổng, Trương Vĩnh Ký's son, who was a "bureau chief" [*trưởng toà*] of Mỹ Tho. His kinship networks crossed racial lines, one of his daughters was wed to the Cambodian governor of Battambang province named Um, and the other married a French surveyor in Bạc Liêu named Lagarde. In 1915, three of his sons were studying in France, and one had joined the French military. Gilbert Chiếu, though roughly the same age as Thọ, was a comparative nobody. Equipped with little more than charisma, a couple

⁵⁶⁷ Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Điều Cổ Hạ Kim Thi Tập*, 89.

⁵⁶⁸ Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Điều Cổ Hạ Kim Thi Tập*, 90–91.

sympathetic French colons, and a family name linked to the provincial backwater of Rạch Giá. He was hopelessly outgunned.

But Chiếu was impetuous. On November 21st 1907, in only the second issue of *Six Provinces News*, he published an article called “Sickened by the times” [Mẫn thời bịnh thế] which fiercely criticized Trần Bá Lộc’s brutality during the conquest, and condemned Thọ’s use of his father’s reputation to curry favor.⁵⁶⁹ Whether Chiếu wrote the article, which was signed with the pen name “True Face” [Mặt thật], is unclear. But the author presented himself as a reader bothered by the material printed in “*Talking Business* and the other dailies” and venting about it to *Six Provinces News*. The article argues that it was natural for France to put down the anti-colonial insurrections which greeted the invasion, but Lộc’s violence exceeded acceptable bounds, and it was therefore reasonable that his victim’s children would continue to hold grudges. Under such conditions, it was unbecoming for Lộc’s son, Trần Bá Thọ, to leverage his father’s ambiguous legacy to demand entitlements. Thus, although the article pulled no punches in its description of Lộc’s brutality, it was chiefly concerned with two distinct problems. First and most apparent, it renegotiated the ideological grounds on which colonial accommodation was taking place. As discussed in chapter four, accommodation required a notion of virtue which could account for both the colonizers and their erstwhile resisters. “Sickened by the times” was an attempt to extend the space for Orchard Heartland accommodation by expanding the legitimate criticism of Trần Bá Lộc’s legacy.

The second problem, which is only hinted at here, was a rejection of the way nepotism was influencing the publishing agenda of the nascent press. Recall that Chiếu was the chief editor of both *Talking Business*, which he ran publicly, and *Six Provinces News*, for which he used an alias. The article begins and ends with the problem of printing. In the opening, the author explains that “the stories I’ve seen in the papers have so agitated me that I can no longer hold my tongue”. After complaining about Lộc’s past brutality and Thọ’s penchant for cashing in on his father’s legacy, he closes with a satirical poem that mentions “those skilled at meddling” and thereby get publishers “to print as a formality, out of such tender feeling for men of yore!” Thus, it seems Chiếu was responding to specific pressure being placed on him to publish Thọ’s writing,

⁵⁶⁹ The relevant section of the article reads: “When the French first arrived the people didn’t submit, they established regiments and engaged in insurrection. Meanwhile commander general Loc, who is also an Annamese, joined as a soldier to serve the State [i.e. the French], and as the sayings go, when you eat the king’s rice you must dance day and night, and whichever trees you plant are the trees you’ll fence in. So when the Governor’s hand was forced, and he ordered the insurgent regiments and the former officials to be executed and exiled, [Lộc] dealt harshly with their wives and children, to the point that, when unable to capture the old officials, he captured infants with the scent of milk still on their breath and tortured them to force surrender, thus he has an ambiguous legacy [*mang lầy tiếng thị phi*], according to his fruits he should be repaid, and going to the extent he did, it’s only right that the families harmed would still carry animosity, and yet in the newspapers with no relevance I see some men print ‘Soldier Loc’ this and that, and I find it bizarre, is it that you men are so reluctant to brag, and yet every time the Commander General of Cai Be [i.e. Trần Bá Thọ] is requesting to say or do this or that, he brags about his father’s achievements long ago, so you men are not satisfied? I’m a man of such humble intelligence, I can’t figure it out, so I’ve described some of the problem for you Confucian gentlemen [*chư nho*] to ponder. My goodness, when the birds of the sky are gone, the bow is put away, when the clever rabbit is dead, the old dog tears it apart!!! Thus, there is the poem

Don’t blame him who’s skilled in meddling

To receive a page so cast aside.

Bring it to the printer they’ll print it as a formality

Out of such tender feeling for men of yore!

Mặt Thật “Mẫn thời bịnh thế,” *LTTV* 2, Nov. 21, 1907, reprinted in Sơn Nam, *Phong trào Duy Tân ở Bắc, Trung, Nam*, 363.

which he apparently found inferior. It may have been the chief censor Diệp Văn Cương applying the pressure.

The rivalry between Thọ and Chiêu quickly spread. According to midcentury South Vietnamese historian Nguyễn Bá Thế's account, Chiêu demanded Thọ contribute a portion of his family fortune to the movement as penance for his father's brutality.⁵⁷⁰ Upon Thọ's refusal, Chiêu began referring to Thọ by the nickname Phước Tôn -- ostensibly meaning "grandson of Phước," a thinly veiled reference to a "dog."⁵⁷¹ Thọ responded by denouncing Chiêu to Lieutenant Governor Ernest Outrey. Outrey's tenure began in February 1908, a date which coincides with Diệp Văn Cương's denunciations of Chiêu's publishing activity, lending some credence to the timeline. Nguyễn Bá Thế also reports that Thọ took to the French press to publicly denounce Chiêu with the help of Jules Adrien Marx and his popular gadfly organ, *L'Indochine Libérale*.⁵⁷² These pressures culminated in Enlightened Renewal Industrial Corporation being searched by colonial police and Chiêu being detained and interrogated. He was released on 21st of April 1909 for lack of any sufficient evidence to prosecute him.

Thế's short article should be read with caution. It shares the hagiographic features which plague the other midcentury nationalist histories discussed in chapter eight, contains no traceable references, and repeats demonstrably erroneous information. These weaknesses notwithstanding, contemporaneous sources corroborates some aspects of the timeline advanced by Nguyễn Bá Thế -- evidence that brings us to the third chief antagonist of the Minh Tân Movement, Lê Văn Trung.

Lê Văn Trung-- *Talking Business's* traditionalist turn against 'Reform'.

Diệp Văn Cương and Trần Bá Thọ were already working behind the scenes to implicate Chiêu when unrelated political upheavals in Annam and Tonkin stoked panic among the French. On March 12th, 1908, tax and corvée revolts spread through Bình Định province, in Annam. By April they had grown to full blown rebellions. A brutal French crackdown culminated with the arrest and exile, on trumped up charges, of the Annamese reformer Phan Châu Trinh on April 4th, and the execution of his colleague Trần Quý Cáp on May 17th. Then, on the 27th of June, a poison plot was uncovered at the French garrison in Hanoi, launching both the Colon community and security services into a vengeful frenzy.⁵⁷³ It was against the backdrop of these dramatic events that the tide turned decisively against Chiêu's nascent publishing and business empire.

⁵⁷⁰ Nguyễn Bá Thế, "Trần Chánh Chiêu vị Đốc Phủ Sứ có quốc tịch Pháp nhưng không bán nước bán dân", *Đuốc Nhà Nam*, Aug. 20, 1971. Reprinted in Nguyễn Văn Trung, *Hồ Sơ về Lục Châu Học - Tìm Hiểu Con Người ở Vùng Đất Mới*, 562. also cited by Sơn Nam, with a different date, Sơn Nam, *Phong trào Duy Tân ở Bắc, Trung, Nam*, 388. Nguyễn Bá Thế was a historian and cultural critic in RVN whose tremendous work in creating the Dictionary of Vietnamese Historical Figures was allegedly stolen by Nguyễn Q Thắng. See "Nguyễn Bá Thế - Nhà Văn Hóa Bị Bỏ Quên - Nam Kỳ Lục Tỉnh," accessed April 19, 2026, <https://www.namkyluctinh.org/tac-gia-tac-pham/n/nguyen-kien-thiet/nguyen-ba-the--nha-van-hoa-bi-bo-quen.html>.

⁵⁷¹ In one especially odd article published in *Six Provinces News*, Thọ appears to claim the name, and attacks Lương Khắc Ninh for not himself investing.

⁵⁷² Nguyễn Bá Thế claims the exchange took place in *La Cochinchine liberale* but this paper wasn't started until 1915. Jules Adrien Marx was editor *L'Indochine liberale* at this time.

⁵⁷³ The colons in Hanoi were whipped up by fake news of additional plots and as many as 400 of them marched on the Governor General demanding vengeance. They destroyed the barricades and held the Governor General prisoner until he vowed to personally accept no appeals from the accused for clemency in the sentencing. The atmosphere

One of the first public cracks in the movement was Nguyễn An Khương's April 4th announcement that he was leaving *Six Provinces News* and passing his position onto Võ Đức Trang.⁵⁷⁴ Though he publicly invoked health reasons, the temporal coincidence with the outrageous sentence issued to Phan Châu Trinh, implies Khương sensed trouble brewing.

Chiếu was still chief editor of both of Cochinchina's major *quốc ngữ* newspapers at the time, *Talking Business* under his legal name, and *Six Provinces News* under the alias Trần Nhật Thăng. On April 21st, only a few weeks after Nguyễn An Khương left, local officials detailed Gilbert Chiếu and ransacked his hotels. Three weeks later, on May 16th, the day before Trần Quý Cáp's execution, *Talking Business's* owner François Canavaggio published a front-page article announcing that Gilbert Chiếu had been fired. "For the past two years I've left *Talking Business* to Prefect Chiếu and District Chief Trự's management. Now I see that these two men did many things that weren't in our contract, and the accounts are irregular, so I have been forced to sue and demand they return the newspaper." From the May 26th issue, the new editor was Lê Văn Trung, who immediately turned *Talking Business* into the chief organ of anti-reform movement propaganda.⁵⁷⁵

Chiếu responded to the loss of *Talking Business* by jettisoning his alias and publicly moving his investment campaigns over to *Six Provinces News*. It's unclear whether the accounting irregularities mentioned by Canavaggio were an accusation of embezzling funds to support student travel to Japan, to support his business operations, or perhaps a more banal form of fraud. In announcing his move to *Six Provinces News*, Gilbert Chiếu placed blame on the newspaper's subscribers for failing to pay their dues.

I've held the chief editing position of *Talking Business* for two years now, expending my strength and resources to promote our people's intellectual flourishing [*khai dân trí*], it should be said that it is thanks to the assistance of you Confucian gentlemen, but now I have too many duties to manage, partly because many gentlemen never paid their subscriptions bringing difficulties to our accounting, so I've returned the magazine to Canavaggio [...] Now I will bring my long pursued investment projects here to *Six Provinces News* and advertise further stock offerings in Enlightened Renewal Industrial Corporation.⁵⁷⁶

Canavaggio surprised Saigonese readers by selecting Lê Văn Trung.⁵⁷⁷ Though a colonial councilor and noted businessman influential among colons, he had neither the literary talent of Lương Khắc Ninh, nor the rhetorical intensity of Gilbert Chiếu. Also, unlike Ninh and Chiếu, Trung was not a scion of the middling gentry of Mekong Delta, but a poorer boy of the Gia Định Plateau.⁵⁷⁸ He was born in Phước Lâm, a rural district south of Saigon. His father died young, leaving him and his brother in the care of his young mother. He graduated from Chasseloup

among the French settlers in the summer of 1908 was extreme panic and rage. de Gantès, "Coloniaux, Gouverneurs et Ministres. L'influence Des Français Du Viet-Nam Sur l'évolution Du Pays à l'époque Coloniale 1902-1914," 8.

⁵⁷⁴ Quoted in Sơn Nam, *Phong trào Duy Tân ở Bắc, Trung, Nam*, 229.

⁵⁷⁵ NCMD 341, May 16, 1908; NCMD 342, May 26, 1908, cited in Phạm Long Điền, "Vai Trò Của Nông Cỏ Mìn Đàm Trong Phong Trào Duy Tân Miền Nam," 28.

⁵⁷⁶ The term *khai dân trí* seems an explicit reference to Phan Châu Trinh, who's death sentence was a major scandal. LTTV 27, May 21, 1908. Sơn Nam, *Phong trào Duy Tân ở Bắc, Trung, Nam*, 230.

⁵⁷⁷ Lê Hoàng Mưu, "Un Hương Nhắc Lại Bốn Mươi Năm Xưa."

⁵⁷⁸ Lê Văn Trung's early biography is recorded in Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Điều Cỏ Hạ Kim Thi Tập*, 180.

Laubat in 1893 and entered the colonial bureaucracy as an interpreter in 1894.⁵⁷⁹ In 1906 he was elected to the Colonial Council to represent the electoral district encompassing Saigon, Gia Định, Chợ Lớn, Tây Ninh, and Gò Công. He served there for 12 years, from 1906-1918, making him the longest serving Vietnamese representative for the Gia Định Plateau for the period stretching from the Minh Tân Movement to the birth of the Constitutionalist Party in 1917.⁵⁸⁰

In 1914 he was selected by Governor of Cochinchina Gourbeil to serve in the *Conseil Supérieur de l'Indochine* in Hanoi. But his steady rise into the stratosphere of colonial politics was interrupted in 1924, when his businesses went bankrupt, and he fell into opium addiction. After two years of deteriorating health, in 1926 he had a religious experience at a Caodaist divination ceremony, put aside his vices, and was reborn as one of the movement's most zealous early activists. He was vital in lobbying French formal recognition of the religion and then oversaw its rapid expansion as its first and only supreme pontiff. He publicly challenged both French settler attacks on the new faith and colonial state suppression.

In sum, he was a talented political operator who owed his early success to the social mobility provided by the colonial bureaucracy. Though as trusted a “collaborator” as one could find, he was prepared to risk his career to oppose colonial policies when they interfered with his beliefs.



Figure 9 Lê Văn Trung in his Cao Đài vestments in the mid-1920s

Lê Văn Trung's fascinating religious career is only indirectly relevant to his role in local elite politics of the era. More important is that he became the public face of the Cochinchinese reaction against the Minh Tân movement in 1908. Unfortunately, I couldn't access the earliest public denunciations of Chiếu -- which appeared in French in early Spring in the pages of Jules

⁵⁷⁹ Later life career information is in “Introduction to Caodaism: Origins and Early History,” in *Pre-Communist Indochina*, by Ralph Bernard Smith (Routledge, 2009), 119.

⁵⁸⁰ Nguyễn Liên Phong writes “ngài xuất thân làm Thông Ngôn tại Thượng thư mười hai năm, qua năm 1906 nhơn dân tuyển cử ngài ra làm hội đồng quản hạt thay mặt cho mấy tỉnh Sài Gòn, Gia Định, Chợ Lớn, Gò Công, Tây Ninh trọn luôn ba khoá là mười hai năm.” Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Điều Cổ Hạ Kim Thi Tập*, 180.

Adrien Marx's *L'Indochine Libérale* and then in Vietnamese starting from Lê Văn Trung's tenure at *Talking Business* at the end of May. Judging from Gilbert Chiếu's responses at *Six Provinces News* discussed in the conclusion of this chapter, the accusations continued to intensify over the course of the summer.

On June 11th Chiếu felt compelled to publish a bitter defense of the movement in which he boasted of having officially notarized the Enlightened Renewal Industrial Corporation's charter. He complained that the work demanded "two years of misery away from home, with my wife missing me and my children crying" and castigated those "men on the sidelines [who] made many slanderous false accusations [*kẻ bàng quan toạ thị bày đặt nhiều điều bỗ vạ cáo gian*]" The article goes on to describe his finances since the floods of 1904 to dispel apparent rumors of bankruptcy. He then stated "these sideliners" [*bàng quan phái*] have started accusing him of "plotting uprisings" [*làm loạn*]. "But why do they hate me so, why do they want me in a cangue? [...] these gentlemen on the sidelines want to ruin Enlightened Renewal Industrial Corp, and that's why they spread such hateful rumors."⁵⁸¹

Two issues later, an article by "L.T.T.V." was published addressing rumors that Enlightened Renewal Hotel in Mỹ Tho had been searched by the police. The article confirmed the search, but only because of a mistaken association with Tê Nam Hotel—thereby implying that Tê Nam was searched with good cause. Rumors that "M. Gilbert Chiếu had disappeared off somewhere" were, according to the article, an effort to "cause hesitation among the Enlightened Renewal Movement" [*muốn phân tâm bọn Minh Tân*], it cautioned "gentlemen of the Six Provinces" to "ignore useless and baseless speculation. As an excuse, it claimed that Chiếu often traveled from Saigon to Mỹ Tho, that the "State had no reason to pursue him, and that he isn't hiding from anybody."⁵⁸²

The fact that Chiếu's did not respond personally indicates that all was not going well, a suspicion confirmed two weeks later, in early July, when the magazine posted a notice claiming that "due to being overburdened M.G. Chiếu is in great pain [...] and the chief editor is recovering in Rạch Giá." Yet just as quickly the tides turned back, with Chieu reappearing three issues later: "Previously the chief editor was ill," a notice announced, "and considered leaving the paper, but he regained his health and has returned to lead it once again."⁵⁸³

Whether Chiếu was nursing some illness or had in fact been detained, pressure was mounting, and the movement was beginning to crack. In a letter to the editor published in mid-August, a trading house clerk named Nguyễn Văn Lang asked Chiếu why he hadn't responded to the "French newspapers that were slandering him" as well as to *Talking Business*, which "intended to wreck the Minh Tân Movement, and said so many unbearable to hear things." According to Lang, "the companies that had offered stocks [...] have all gone cold, now only Enlightened Renewal Industrial Corporation is left. Why is that? Please make it clear, so that it doesn't seem so suspicious?"

Gilbert Chiếu's response was indignant,

⁵⁸¹ Sn 369, "Trực Trần Chi Từ", *LTTV* 30, June 11, 1908; Sơn Nam, *Phong trào Duy Tân ở Bắc, Trung, Nam*, 369.

⁵⁸² "Việc xét tiệm Minh Tân Khách Sạn" *LTTV* 32, June 25, 1908; Sơn Nam, *Phong trào Duy Tân ở Bắc, Trung, Nam*, 371.

⁵⁸³ Issues 34 and 37 are cited in Sơn Nam, *Phong trào Duy Tân ở Bắc, Trung, Nam*, 230.

How could I respond? There is a man who has long hated me, a man who is hiding behind the owner of that [French] newspaper and falsely accusing me of many things. He's making personal matters public [*lấy việc tư làm chuyện chung*]. I've committed no transgressions with the state; I've got no time for such trivial matters. Let people talk, if one is without blemish then that is enough [...] And regarding *Talking Business's* wishes to wreck the Enlightened Renewal Industrial Corporation, that's their business, there's nothing I can do to stop it. I will do my work, and whoever wants to wreck will wreck. I leave that up to the gentlemen of the Six Provinces to evaluate. Regarding the companies which offered subscriptions, but which have gone cold. How could there be progress if at every opening appears a jealous and spiteful person. Who [by investing] would take the food from the plates and clothes off the back of his own wife and children just to be smeared with a useless reputation? I alone will, an old buffalo unafraid of machetes, let them accuse!⁵⁸⁴

This defiance continued until his arrest in October. Some articles depicted the campaign against him as malicious rumors meant to impugn his reputation as a businessman.⁵⁸⁵ Others rejected rumors of criminal activity and deplored the recent decay in the moral quality of Vietnamese officials. Despite France's efforts to "always instill honesty and uprightness" in its subjects, corrupt provincial Vietnamese interpreters had grown accustomed to bringing false accusations to satisfy their personal vendettas. "If the Provincial governor believes their accusations then that's enough, if not then they'll plant bootleg alcohol or opium, they'll plant false documents, with fake stamps, brevets, and ledgers" in order to accuse "this person of being a member of a clandestine religion [*đạo kín*], that person of rebellion [*làm loạn*], others of banditry, theft, bribery and murder." The campaign against Gilbert Chiếu was no different, carried out by men "who want to humiliate others through journalism but hide their names."⁵⁸⁶

One September article directly broached the political content of the movement, with Gilbert Chiếu framing himself as a follower of a middle reformist path between revolution and conservatism. A letter to the editor from a self-described "common peasant" [*dân làm ruộng*] stated, "yesterday I saw *Talking Business* say, 'Cochinchina's reform movement [*Duy Tân Nam Kỳ*] would see their day in Cayenne', what did they mean? If they are saying that Reform is bad, then why did our emperor take the name Reform? Please explain to me so I don't panic."⁵⁸⁷ In his response, Gilbert Chiếu explicitly rejected any revolutionary vision.

The rebel soldiers in China who have trespassed into Tonkin are a *Revolutionary Party* [*Cách Mệnh Đảng*],⁵⁸⁸ meaning those who reject the monarchy and wish to establish a Chinese republic. Meanwhile Reformers [*bọn Duy-tân*] are thus: whoever wishes to change ways and transform mores [*đi phong diệc tục*] is called reformer [*duy tân*], if you wear western clothes, cut your hair, leave your teeth white, wear western shoes, read newspapers, are a newspaper editor, manager, contributor or the audience, *et cetera*, all of

⁵⁸⁴ "Thơ tín Vãng Lai," *LTTV* 40, in Sơn Nam, *Phong trào Duy Tân ở Bắc, Trung, Nam*, 380. SN 380

⁵⁸⁵ For example two short fables recounted tales of petty business and craftspeople, encouraging readers to look at oneself before judging others, and to judge others generously and not assume crimes, see: Nghịch Tự, "Hai cách đoán người" *LTTV* 41, Aug. 27, 1908; Sơn Nam, *Phong trào Duy Tân ở Bắc, Trung, Nam*, 383.

⁵⁸⁶ Dị Nhơn, "Bỏ vạ" *LTTV* 44, Sept 17, 1908; Sơn Nam, *Phong trào Duy Tân ở Bắc, Trung, Nam*, 386.

⁵⁸⁷ Cayenne refers to imprisonment in French Guyane.

⁵⁸⁸ Chiếu provides a footnote with the French word "Révolutionnaire" to explain the term "Cách Mệnh Đảng".

these are *duy tân* (Rénovateurs)[sic]. If you mimic past customs, hold to the ancient rites of your forefathers and act according to their ways, it's called *thủ cựu* (Routiniers) [sic]. They speak erroneously due to their lack of clarity and thereby deceive themselves [*hoạ phù thân đái*]. A single word can determine the fate of a nation [*nhứt ngôn dĩ hưng bang, nhứt ngôn dĩ tán bang*], a misspoken sentence will cause the people [*thiên hạ*] to reject all of *Talking Business*. You say you are panicked, but why? If reform [*duy tân*] is guilty then all are guilty.

One of the only extant passages from *Talking Business*'s attacks, an October 6th anonymously authored article entitled Reform [*Duy Tân*], appears to be a direct rejoinder to Chiêu's rebuttal.

What is this Reform? It is to change ways and destroy mores [*di phong diệt tục*], it is to chase after the new and study western ways, wear western clothes, cut one's hair, leave one's teeth white, wear western shoes, read newspapers and be an editor, *et cetera*. Oh, you must be very erudite to understand indeed! The Mongolians must forgo the title of lofty clarity and hold their tongue, since they are unwilling, for purposes of "reform", to abandon the traditions in their bones, there for generations and impossible to leave. Each country has its own customs, no matter how ugly Annamese customs are, they can only be remedied gradually. Each country has its own rituals, in the West they dance holding hands, how could Annam possibly copy such customs?⁵⁸⁹

Judging from the rebuttals published in *Six Provinces News*, Trung's accusations ran the gamut from fraud to disloyalty and political crimes. But the above exchange directs us to an unappreciated aspect of the public controversy surrounding the movement—a thread of cultural conservatism commonplace among Chiêu's rivals over the course of his brief public career. In chapter six we saw similar tendencies already present in the 1905 debates between Chiêu in *L'Avenir du Tonkin* and his opponents in *France d'Asie*. They also appeared from the earliest days of his tenure at *Talking Business*, where traces of traditionalist opposition appeared in the hair cutting debates of 1906. Similar tensions are likewise clear in the intense religious debates spanning the *Manifesto* and *Six Provinces News* from its founding in November 1907. When Lê Văn Trung commandeered *Talking Business* at the end of April, the conservative campaign against deracination and westernization gained a powerful platform.

This traditionalist ideological orientation was shaped by the demographic features Trung shared with the movement's other opponents. Lê Văn Trung was from the Gia Định Plateau, rather than the Orchard Heartland. His pathway into the elite mirrored that of Diệp Văn Cương—a middling background vaulted by the opportunities provided by a clerical career in the colonial bureaucracy. He, like Trần Bá Thọ and Diệp Văn Cương, leveraged these advantages into a business and political career, eventually reaching the highest levels open to native subjects.

Chapter three examined the geographic and demographic backgrounds of the pre–World War One elite, positing a rough divide between two broad factions. On the one hand was an older Orchard Heartland gentry. These figures rallied later to the colonial arrangement and entered the elite through the local oligarchic systems of rural rule, such as canton chiefs and village councilors. The golden age of colonial accommodation, which coincided with the Doumer

⁵⁸⁹ Cited in Phạm Long Điền, "Vai Trò Của Nông Cổ Mín Đàm Trong Phong Trào Duy Tân Miền Nam," 28.; a subsequent response can be found in "Phụng đáp Duy Tân," *LTTV* 51 in Sơn Nam, *Phong trào Duy Tân ở Bắc, Trung, Nam*, 399.

reforms and which set the broader ideological commitments of Cochinchinese colonial hegemony, corresponded to the melding of this older Orchard Heartland faction with a relatively newer class of colonial bureaucrats hailing from the Gia Định Plateau. These men owed their status to meritocratic institutions of French education and civil service. Trần Bá Thọ is the exception that proves the rule. Though his familial hometown was in the core Orchard Heartland area of Cái Bè, his career trajectory—his father a first-generation defector to colonization, a Metropolitan education, ascent through the ranks of the civil service—places him firmly among the bureaucrats like Trung and Cường.

The Minh Tân Movement represented the first clash of the two great factions of Colonial Cochinchinese Vietnamese society -- Saigonese clerks and Mekong Delta rural oligarchs. The division is imperfect. Sons of the Orchard Heartland elites entered the civil service and moved to Saigon, and children of the Gia Định clerks married widely into the rural nobility, welding the factions together at various points. Moreover, the terrain of struggle itself was dynamic, changing administrative practices, business opportunities, electoral laws and land granting practices encouraged Saigonese clerical encroachment over the heartland clans. Despite these important caveats, the fundamental division between town and country determined Cochinchinese political movements for decades. From Constitutionalism, to Caodaism, to Communism, each movement in its own way repeated Chiếu's experience, faltering in the mission to unite leadership across the Vaico River. The continual exacerbation of this fundamental division lent Cochinchina its notorious fissiparousness.

Conclusion

Gilbert Chiếu's connections to Phan Bội Châu and the Go East Movement proved to be his ultimate undoing. Colonial state repression of the reformist movements began in earnest in 1908, but it did not proceed evenly across the colony. For a time, Chiếu enjoyed a modicum of colonial favor not accorded to his northern or central region counterparts. Thus, at the same time northern officials were shuttering the Tonkin Free School in January, Chiếu's vocational and business programs was receiving help from the Governor of Cochinchina. But the tax upheavals in Annam in March, and especially the Hanoi Poison Plot in June, dampened the atmosphere, launching the colonial security services into a frenzied search for patsies to collar. Oriented toward East Asia since Doumer, and in a state of near constant anxiety over Japan since 1904, security officials placed under harsh scrutiny anything even remotely associated with China? at a time when panicked settlers were baying for blood.

Orthodox accounts attribute Chiếu's downfall to gumshoe detective work. The story, as narrated by the colonial prosecution, claims that on August 11, 1908, Governor Outrey sent a Chinese interpreter named "Tran Dieu Nguyen" as a police spy aboard a ship to Japan. He was easily able to crack Go East Movement activist networks, ingratiating himself to the point that two young students from the Mekong Delta trusted him with possession of incriminating photographs and documents. These were submitted to police on his return to the colony, and the subsequent investigation quickly uprooted the whole revolutionary network, leading to the October 31 arrest of Chiếu and 90 co-conspirators.⁵⁹⁰

⁵⁹⁰ "Michel Report" ANOM- NF8-28(2), 12.; See also Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism 1885-1925*, 145.

The dissertation has attended to local dynamics over exilic conspiracies, and this chapter's objective has been to determine how Chiếu's downfall played out locally. Doing so has revealed that colonial officials made constant reference to the decisive role played by Vietnamese intermediaries in the case, and attacks on Chiếu filled the press long before his October arrest. Chiếu, for his part, remained consistent in his defense: he had committed no crime and was being slandered by rivals jealous of his success. The colonial prosecution itself was eventually forced to admit as much. As chapter eight showed, officials immediately set out to legislate emergency powers that would ensure it could never again be constrained by the absence of wrongdoing in its ability to imprison a declared enemy of the state. The rollback of the abolition of the *indigénat* was, in this sense, a direct consequence of Chiếu's acquittal.

How accurate were the accusations against him? Can we trust that evidence was not fabricated, or that testimony was not extracted through torture? The fin-de-siècle French intelligence services were, after all, notorious for such repressive practices. Despite ample grounds for suspicion, historians have not broached the problem, preferring to take the French secret police — and their Vietnamese informants — at their word. The remainder of this chapter allows Chiếu's colleagues to make the closing arguments in his defense which have been missing from the historical record.

Six Provinces News responded to the dragnet arrests by insisting that the accusations against Chieu were lies spread by spiteful Vietnamese elites. On October 22, 1908, a lengthy letter addressed to "Mr. Võ Đức Trang, manager of *Six Provinces News*" described a police raid on the pagoda of the venerable master Nguyễn Giác Nguyên of Cần Thơ. No revolutionary paraphernalia turned up in the search. The Vietnamese agent conducting it privately told the Monk that "a gentleman [*có một vị đồ*] noticed your success and wished to ruin you for amusement; he sent a letter to the Governor denouncing you for having brevets, so the governor sent me to search your pagoda, but since there's nothing here, feel free to return to your religious practice." The letter-writer was incensed that such jealousy among Vietnamese should have been allowed to slow the business movement and let Chinese and Indian commercial interests, as he put it, pillage the nation's resources.⁵⁹¹

A week later Pierre Jeantet, the French owner of *Six Provinces News*, put out a front-page notice reading:

The chief editor of *Six Provinces News* has been arrested for grave felonies [...] The State also notified the editorial board that it has no faith in G. Chieu's loyalty and innocence [*tin dạ trung nghĩa*] and has therefore ordered he be fettered and placed under extraordinary surveillance. The editorial board and owner have expressed our feelings to Chieu and are unshakeable in our belief that it is a false accusation. We are certain that it is nothing more than a figure with great resentment over the foundation of corporations all over that is looking for a way to spite [Gilbert Chiếu].⁵⁹²

While *Talking Business* was gloating over the arrests, Jeantet posted a follow up notice in the next issue reiterating his support for his editor. "[Gilbert] Chiếu's imprisonment was a mistake,

⁵⁹¹ La vĩa Đố, "Monsieur Võ Đức Trang chủ sự Lục Tỉnh Tân Văn," *LTTV* 49, Oct. 22. 1908.; Sơn Nam, *Phong trào Duy Tân ở Bắc, Trung, Nam*, 393.

⁵⁹² Chủ nhơn, "Biến cáo Lục Châu tôn khách," *LTTV* 50, Oct. 29 1908, and *LTTV* 51, Nov. 5, 1908; Sơn Nam, *Phong trào Duy Tân ở Bắc, Trung, Nam*, 396.

public opinion will soon know. Though this unjust charge has official sanction, even good gold is further purified by flame.” Jeantet expressed his regret at the setback Gilbert Chiếu’s arrest represented for *Six Province News*’ mission of “leading the Vietnamese” in learning from France, and lamented that “so many [French] do not truly understanding the East”.⁵⁹³ His steadfast defense of Gilbert Chiếu at such a dangerous moment indicates the depth of his investment in the movement, and suggests that the colonial-anticolonial division mattered less at the time than historians have assumed.⁵⁹⁴

The contributors to *Six Provinces News* placed ultimate blame on the short-sightedness and jealousy displayed by the Vietnamese who made the accusations. A series of articles appeared under the heading “Criticisms” [Nguyệt Đán Bình] that attempted to make sense of the movement’s collapse. Some were harsh. One compared Chiếu’s Vietnamese rivals to vermin who, “having climbed to the top of the ladder,” pull it away from their less-blessed countrymen below — an act the author condemned as “against the laws of creation.” He added that “happenstance leads one to believe empowerment will come easy, forgetting beneath one’s feet lie venomous bugs and snakes.” Another, signed anonymously as Old-Man [Lão Phu], “daily prayed to the lords of heaven and earth that the minds of these traitorous fools should realize that their behavior is that of dogs and swine, and that they turn away from evil and toward righteousness.”⁵⁹⁵

Others sought to historicize the experience. A man named Nguyễn Hữu Lễ reflected on the connection between Lương Khắc Ninh and Gilbert Chiếu: Ninh had pioneered the politics before “passing *Talking Business* over to County Chief Chiếu, who followed Ninh’s path, but was fortunate to win the hearts of people who excitedly sent requests to invest.” But Chiếu’s movement to build factories for both profit making and vocational training was dashed by figures who “wished for personal revenge [...] to spread word that Mr. Prefect Chiếu was using those funds for personal gain, others said he was using the money for treason [làm nghịch]”. But this made little sense, since Chiếu “often praised the French state and encouraged citizens to peacefully focus on their livelihoods. Thus, they falsely accused to him”.⁵⁹⁶

The contributors to *Six Provinces News* were defending a reformist editor against a campaign of denunciation by his fellow Vietnamese—a wildly different story from the one transmitted via Marty and Coulet into the nationalist historiography. Ultimately, the Enlightened Renewal Industrial Corporation was dissolved, its leaders scattered or imprisoned, and its press silenced. But the thirst for civic associations, mutual-aid societies, and commercial networks that the movement had inspired did not disappear with it. The program of anti-Chinese commercial nationalism would be carried forward by the Constitutionalist Party a decade later, and would find its largest public expression in the boycotts of 1919.

⁵⁹³ Pierre Jeantet, “Dẫn Kiến,” *LTTV* 52, Nov. 12, 1908; Sơn Nam, *Phong trào Duy Tân ở Bắc, Trung, Nam*, 402.

⁵⁹⁴ It would be of considerable interest to track the decay of Chiếu’s support in *Six Provinces News* after 1908 — to see whether the editorial line shifted suddenly toward provocation, or whether the editorial board remained in the crosshairs of the colonial security services for reasons of its own. Unfortunately, the articles curated by Sơn Nam were selected from a bound volume comprising only the first 52 issues, which leaves the record at the point the Minh Tân activists began processing the meaning of Chiếu’s arrest.

⁵⁹⁵ *LTTV* 50, Oct. 29 1908, and *LTTV* 51, Nov. 5, 1908; Sơn Nam, *Phong trào Duy Tân ở Bắc, Trung, Nam*, 397–401.

⁵⁹⁶ Nguyễn Hữu Lễ, “Nguyệt Đán Bình,” *LTTV* 52, Nov. 12, 1908, Sơn Nam, *Phong trào Duy Tân ở Bắc, Trung, Nam*, 384.

Conclusion

This dissertation has reconstructed the emergence of a south Vietnamese elite who played a critical but underappreciated role in the country's early nationalist movement by spearheading anti-Chinese campaigns. The movement barely registers in the historiography because it did not foreground the anti-colonial concerns of the literati activists who dominate the scholarship on modern Vietnamese political history. Instead, movement leaders voiced the interests of an emergent political bloc which had accommodated itself to the colonial arrangement and mobilized an alliance between traditional elites from the Mekong Delta's "Orchard Heartland" and Western-educated "new men" who staffed the colonial bureaucracy. The bloc coalesced under the colonial promise of national rejuvenation through economic development. It targeted resident Chinese and Indian merchants, who movement activists perceived to be encroaching on "native" Vietnamese patrimony as part of an anti-immigrant campaign to reclaim commercial power for the indigenous population. Although the Cochinchinese iteration of the early national movement contributed to the Go East Movement alongside its Tonkinese and Annamese counterparts, it was based in the Southern particularities of colonial capitalism and subaltern racial and class structures.

The dissertation has unfolded in three parts. Part 1 reconstructed the anatomy of this elite bloc; Part 2 tracked the translation of its worldview into a political program; Part 3 reconstructed the collapse of that program and the historiographical distortions that have obscured it. The remainder of this coda recapitulates the central findings of each part, names the conceptual and methodological contributions that follow from them, addresses the dissertation's limitations and the threads it leaves unresolved, and closes with a sketch of the institutional and political bridge that links the Reform Movement of 1907–1908 to the Constitutionalist Party and the Interwar Period.

The Anatomy of an Elite Bloc

Part 1 reconstructed the social and ideological foundations of the elite that anchored the early-twentieth-century Cochinchinese business movement. Against the long-standing characterization of the southern elite as a deracinated class of "kitchen boy mandarins" produced by the colonial conquest, I argued that the so-called "flight of the mandarins" did not constitute a year-zero for the Cochinchinese elite.⁵⁹⁷ The gentry of the Orchard Heartland — the band of raised beach ridges and goldilocks zone running along the eastern Mekong distributaries — retained its social standing across the colonial divide, rallying to colonial accommodation in the closing decades of the nineteenth century.

Chapter two established the *longue durée* conditions for this rally. Three intersecting transformations opened the political and economic space in which the gentry could organize: the exhaustion of armed Nguyễn resistance and the Franco-Nguyễn Détente that followed, the collapse of the Chinese revenue-farm regime, and Paul Doumer's "Indochinese Moment" of accumulation through state contracts and infrastructure. The anti-Chinese commercial nationalism was a strategic response to the changed colonial terrain.

⁵⁹⁷ Woodside, *Community and Revolution in Modern Vietnam*; Osborne, *The French Presence in Cochinchina and Cambodia: Rule and Response (1859-1905)*.

Chapters three and four then specified the social composition and worldview of this bloc through a quantitative reading of Nguyễn Liên Phong's verse gazetteer *Figures and Folkways of the South* (1909) and his companion biographical dictionary *Verses of Homage* (1915).⁵⁹⁸ Subjecting these texts to prosopographic analysis yielded a portrait of a southern elite organized around two poles. On one side stood the Saigon and Gia Định clerks, whose careers depended on French educational credentials and on advancement through the central colonial bureaucracy. On the other stood the rural notables of the Orchard Heartland, whose authority rested on oligarchic village politicking, kinship, and the management of ritual and local infrastructure. Marriage and business partnership knit these poles together across generations, weaving the early collaborator dynasties of Trần Bá and Lê Phát into the families of provincial canton chiefs and into the founders of Vietnamese print capitalism. Chapter four then read *Figures and Folkways* as window onto this elite's worldview. Their Confucian moral framework judged Khmer pagodas, Catholic parishes, Chinese temples, and French administrative offices alike by a single standard of institutional order and ritual regularity, and they accepted the French *mise en valeur* as the latest chapter in a centuries-old Vietnamese settler-colonial project.

Two conclusions follow from Part 1 that bear restating. First, the orthodox periodization positing a clean break between a precolonial elite and a colonial one does not hold: the elite that mattered for early-twentieth-century Cochinchinese politics was a *recomposed* precolonial elite, not a class of parvenu collaborators conjured by French patronage. Second, the rural–urban dichotomy that has structured Vietnamese historiography since R. B. Smith collapses: the canton chiefs of the Orchard Heartland and the clerks of Saigon were not separate worlds but two pillars of a single political bloc, and the dissertation's most consequential factional struggles unfolded between them, not between an “urban” elite and a “rural” peasantry. In this respect the heyday of Cochinchinese colonial collaboration was less a stable consensus than a tense equilibrium that would be shaken by the French dethroning emperor Thành Thái.⁵⁹⁹

From worldview to political program

Part 2 tracked the translation of this gentry worldview into a political program. The first articulation came in 1901 with the founding of *Talking Business over Tea* by François Canavaggio and Lương Khắc Ninh. Chapter five read Lương Khắc Ninh as an organic intellectual for the Orchard Heartland Gentry. He was a Bến Tre clerk vaulted into the Colonial Council whose recurring column “Commercial Discourses” formulated the program that would dominate Cochinchinese elite politics for two decades: pool gentry capital into modern firms; displace Chinese and Indian intermediaries from the colonial economy; cultivate a Vietnamese business culture grounded in the Confucian virtues of trustworthiness, righteousness, and duty. What I have called Lương Khắc Ninh's “Confucian Saint-Simonianism” placed the modern firm at the center of national revival — an elixir that would cure a broken distrustful culture and anemic economy, both ruined by a parasitic landed class all too happy to let foreigners cart off the Vietnamese national patrimony in exchange for the false security of ground rents.

But Lương Khắc Ninh's five years of editorializing produced no successful firms. Even more hypocritically, he left the newspaper to join the Governor of Cochinchina's Privy Council,

⁵⁹⁸ Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Nam kỳ Phong tục Nhơn vật Diển ca Chú thích* (Nhà xuất bản Văn hoá - Văn nghệ, 2014); Nguyễn Liên Phong, *Điều Cổ Hạ Kim Thi Tập* (Nhà xuất bản Văn hoá - Văn nghệ, 2013).

⁵⁹⁹ The term “heyday” is borrowed from Milton Osborne, *The French Presence in Cochinchina and Cambodia: Rule and Response (1859–1905)* (Cornell University Press, 1969).

spending the last three decades of his life managing his rubber plantation. Chapters six and seven traced how Gilbert Chiếu, taking over *Talking Business* in 1906 and founding *Six Provinces News* in 1907, converted Lương Khắc Ninh's rhetoric into institutions. Two local triggers opened the conditions for that transition: the ecological catastrophe of the 1904–1906 floods and droughts, which bankrupted Chiếu himself, and the September 1907 dethronement of Emperor Thành Thái, which struck at the affective foundations of the Franco-Nguyễn Détente. Gilbert Chiếu's contribution was not ideological, after all, the *Minh Tân Manifesto* only lightly adjusted Lương Khắc Ninh's program. His contribution was institutional. The Enlightened Renewal Industrial Corporation, the Enlightened Renewal Hotel chain, the rice trust, and the eighteen-plus autonomous grassroots enterprises founded under the Minh Tân banner constitute the first organized bid by the Cochinchinese gentry to convert local administrative authority into economic and political leadership.

Chapter seven's mapping of the movement's twenty-six known institutions showed the important role played by the Orchard Heartland Gentry. Grassroots enterprises clustered there, and they had no conceivable connection to Phan Bội Châu's exilic networks. They united under the Minh Tân banner because its slogan gave dignifying expression to the practical ambitions of canton chiefs and village notables whose administrative careers had acquainted them with the levers of local power but left them jealously subordinate to Chinese and Indian competitors.

Police historiography and intra-elite rivalry

How did the historiography come to see this provincial business movement as an anti-colonial revolutionary network? Chapter eight introduced the concept of “police historiography” to name this distortion. The embryonic Sûreté Générale constructed the orthodox interpretation of the movement to justify its own institutional consolidation; Louis Marty formalized it after the 1916 Cochinchina troubles; Georges Coulet popularized it in his 1926 *Secret Societies in the Annamese Lands*; Vietnamese nationalists adopted it, inverting its valence but keeping its categories; and it passed into Anglophone scholarship through David Marr. Tracing the Marr footnote chain back to its source, I showed that a body of supposedly diverse Vietnamese and French sources on Gilbert Chiếu's journalism reduces to a single document: Procureur Général Michel's April 1909 report, written to rationalize Chiếu's acquittal and to lobby for the legal expansion of the *indigénat*. To make the Cochinchinese case commensurate with the Hanoi Poison Plot and the Annam tax revolts of 1908, and to bridge the obvious gap between those events and Chiếu's manifestly bourgeois reformism, the prosecution exaggerated both the degree of sedition and the breadth of conspiracy.

If the Minh Tân Movement was not a revolutionary network dismantled by the security state, what caused its collapse? Chapter nine provided an answer that foregrounded local dynamics. Three Vietnamese rivals — Diệp Văn Cương, chief of the interpreters' bureau and *de facto* censor of the Vietnamese press; Trần Bá Thọ, son of the early collaborator Trần Bá Lộc; and the colonial councilor Lê Văn Trung, who would later become the first pope of Caodaiism — campaigned against Chiếu in the spring and summer of 1908 through both private channels with the colonial administration and public denunciation, first in *L'Indochine Libérale* and then, after May 1908, in *Talking Business* itself. All three were rooted in the Gia Định Core clerical elite, and their opposition is best read as the first major factional clash between the older colonial loyalists of Saigon and the more recently rallied rural officials of the Orchard Heartland. The Go East connections were ultimately decisive for Chiếu's downfall, but Vietnamese rivals — not

French gumshoes — drove the months of public denunciation that preceded the October arrest, a fact the historiography has almost entirely ignored.

Conceptual and Methodological Contributions

Several contributions follow from these chapters that extend beyond the immediate case. First, the dissertation proposes a periodization — the Franco-Nguyễn Détente roughly corresponding to the reign of Thành Thái and Duy Tân (1889-1916) — that names the political settlement under which the southern gentry made their accommodation. The détente was not a treaty or a single event but an arrangement that allowed elite Vietnamese to reconcile cooperation with France with continued loyalty to the Nguyễn court at Huế. The period roughly corresponds to Gerard Sasges’s notion of the “Indochinese Moment,” which I have extended from French colons to the Vietnamese elite. The same fiscal and infrastructural reforms that produced the great colonial conglomerates — bond-funded public works, the dismantling of the revenue farms, the rise of state contracting — also produced the gentry business movement.

Second, I have argued that the Orchard Heartland — my translation of Vietnamese historian Sơn Nam’s concept the *miệt vườn* — should be treated as a politically meaningful region whose distinctive ecology, settlement history, and elite reproduction shaped early-twentieth-century political history. The region is unique for its lineage networks, which survived across the conquest; and its intermediate position between the Frenchified Saigon-Cholon agglomeration to the east and the large estates frontier to the west.

Third, the dissertation has theorized the Cochinchinese elite bloc using the “articulation school” of political sociology, arguing that the Orchard Heartland Gentry did not exist as a political subject before *Talking Business* named it as one. The articulating act — identifying a common enemy (Chinese commercial dominance), proposing a common program (the modern firm), and constructing a common moral vocabulary (Confucian-Saint-Simonian) — was the political work of the early-twentieth-century Cochinchinese press. This framing brings the Vietnamese case into conversation with broader debates in historical sociology about how parties and political blocs come into being, and it suggests that the long-standing tendency in Vietnamese studies to read political movements as expressions of pre-existing class interests has obscured the strategic and contingent dimensions of political formation.

Loose-ends and Limitations

The dissertation leaves several threads unresolved. Gender is the most consequential. With minor exceptions my account has been a history of men. The verse gazetteers and biographical dictionaries that anchor Part 1 were written by men, primarily about men, and the periodicals of Part 2 carried no female bylines. However, there are two important leads that I failed to adequately explore. First, of the 118 women mentioned in *Verses of Homage*, 111 of them are nameless or partially named wives and daughters of important men. Some of these women, while nameless, played a vital role binding together powerful clans through marriage strategies, and I only discussed a handful of such cases in chapter three. Still, there are nineteen women who did receive entries of their own and whom I have been unable to incorporate into the main text of the dissertation. Some of the entries are historical figures associated with Nguyễn Ánh’s campaigns in the Delta, but the majority appear as widows of wealthy patriarchs who served as important patrons of religious institutions and theater arts. My initial attempts at incorporating these figures

into the main text foundered on my poor grasp of the specific history of Cochinchinese Buddhism and performance art—a problem I hope to remedy in subsequent revisions.

One other oversight is especially regrettable: the case of Sương Nguyệt Anh, daughter to the famous blind poet Nguyễn Đình Chiểu. Not only does she have an entry in *Verses of Homage*, where she is praised for her Confucian erudition and poetic skill, she also carried on a poetry feud with Lương Khắc Ninh, and in 1917 founded the first woman's newspaper, *Women's Bell* [Nữ Giới Chung]. Sương Nguyệt Anh deserved a section of her own. She had previously appeared across fragments which did not survive the editing process, particularly a planned chapter on the World War I period that ultimately did not fit into this dissertation.

A second limitation concerns the broader Indochinese space. I have argued that the Cochinchinese movement should be detached from the exilic-literati narrative that places Phan Bội Châu and the Go East Movement at the center of early-twentieth-century Vietnamese politics. That detachment risks understating the genuine connections between southern reformers and the Tonkin Free School activists exiled to the Mekong Delta after 1908. For example, Phan Châu Trinh was exiled in Mỹ Tho, Vũ Hoành in Sa Đéc, Dương Bá Trạc in Long Xuyên, Nguyễn Quyền in Bến Tre. One might add Hồ Học Lãm's apparent endorsement of *Figures and Folkways* and Trần Hàm Trung's of *Verses of Homage*, both traced in chapter three. These are threads worth pulling further, as is the longer connection between Cochinchina and the North-Central Region literati activist diaspora. I have been harshly critical of reducing the Cochinchinese space to any sort of “global” or even “national”, and I think that these post-1908 connections have been unfairly read backwards in time to obscure the business movement. Nevertheless, by Phan Châu Trinh's funeral riots in 1926, Cochinchinese politics had become undeniably national. I have been so far unable to account for that change.

A related third limitation inheres in my regional focus. I have attempted a spatially limited political history focused on the central provinces of the Mekong Delta — the Orchard Heartland proper — and the Gia Định Core. The Western Fringe provinces of Bạc Liêu, Cà Mau, and Hà Tiên, where the largest concentrations of Brocheux's “absentee landlord” elite developed in the interwar period, fall mostly outside the analysis. So too do the Eastern Fringe provinces of Tây Ninh, Thủ Dầu Một, Biên Hoà, and Bà Rịa, whose distinct ecologies and ethnic configurations would reward a separate treatment. The dissertation's argument is that the Orchard Heartland was the political center of gravity for the pre–World War I elite; it does not claim to map the whole social terrain of Cochinchina. However, any future attempt to extend this dissertation's insights into the subsequent period will be forced to wrestle with the fact that many of the wealthiest and most powerful Cochinchinese Vietnamese began to concentrate in large estates further west. Were these men elites from the Gia Định Core or the Orchard Heartland? How does such a shift in the center of gravity affect the later boundary of my periodization? At what point would the Orchard Heartland Gentry cease to play an important role? These are all questions I look to return to in later work.

A fourth limitation concerns the Constitutionalist Party period itself. This dissertation closes in 1909, with the dissolution of the Minh Tân enterprises and the expansion of colonial security powers. The institutional and political history of the decade between Gilbert Chiểu's arrest and the founding of the Constitutionalist Party in 1917 — and of the boycotts of 1919 that brought the party to prominence — remains unwritten. I outline it in the closing section below, but the full reconstruction of that bridge is a project for future work.

A Preliminary Account of the Constitutionalist Period

By arresting Gilbert Chiếu and dismantling his organizations, colonial police temporarily stunned the business movement. But they did not destroy it. The movement returned with renewed energy a decade later in the spectacular anti-Chinese boycotts led by the Constitutionalist Party in 1919. As discussed in the introduction to this dissertation, recent scholarship has described the boycotts' press campaign in detail, situating it within a decades-long interethnic debate overlooked by earlier scholarship preoccupied with conflicts between the Vietnamese and the French.⁶⁰⁰ Yet historians have thus far ignored the preceding stage of class consolidation and political organizing that made the 1919 boycotts possible.

I leave the full reconstruction of that institutional bridge for future work, but the outlines are visible from the materials presented here. After Gilbert Chiếu's arrest, the civic organizational energy of the Orchard Heartland gentry did not dissipate. It shifted into the *Sociétés Indigènes de Crédit Agricole Mutuel* (SICAMs) and the *Sociétés d'Enseignement Mutuel* (SEMs) — institutions briefly noted by Brocheux but never connected by previous scholarship to the Minh Tân precedents they reproduced under colonial sponsorship.⁶⁰¹

These institutions coincided with the Minh Tân Movement and similarly developed first in the Orchard Heartland — probably also reactions to the devastations of the 1904-1906 environmental disasters. The first were founded by Cochinchinese in Hanoi, then Vietnamese in Phnom Penh.⁶⁰² An SEM was founded in Mỹ Tho in July 1906. By the end of the year one had been established in Bạc Liêu, Cần Thơ, Vĩnh Long, Bến Tre, and Saigon. The provincial administrator Lorin sent a letter to the governor of Cochinchina which made the organizations political overtones clear, these societies weren't meant to teach, but rather to “develop an elite to guide the development [of the illiterate], with support of patronage committees, toward a French orientation in the best interests of Franco-Annamite common interests.” No doubt sensing the political ramifications of these developments, Lorin closed his letter by opining on the possibility that these local organizations might affiliate with one another, “Is there not a political interest of the first order in [...] dividing them as much as possible the better to keep watch over them?”

But the French couldn't keep them apart. The parent SEM of Cochinchina, based in Saigon, also opened in 1906. The SEM of Cần Thơ immediately affiliated with it. Its first president was Diệp Văn Cương — later enemy of Gilbert Chiếu. Founding chief editor of *Talking Business* Lương Khắc Ninh served as *commissaire*. It had two librarians: the author of Vietnam's first modern short story Nguyễn Trọng Quản and founding member of the Constitutionalist Party Lê Quang Liêm (Bảy).

⁶⁰⁰ Micheline R. Lessard, “Organisons-Nous! Racial Antagonism and Vietnamese Economic Nationalism in the Early Twentieth Century,” *French Colonial History* 8, no. 1 (2007): 171–201; Christopher E. Goscha, “Widening the Colonial Encounter: Asian Connections Inside French Indochina During the Interwar Period,” *Modern Asian Studies* 43, no. 5 (2009): 1189–1228.

⁶⁰¹ Pierre Brocheux, *The Mekong Delta: Ecology, Economy, and Revolution, 1860–1960* (Center for Southeast Asian Studies, University of Wisconsin–Madison, 1995), 76. See also the discussion in chapter one of this dissertation.

⁶⁰² All information on the SEM in the following paragraphs drawn from: 18878 “Dossier relatif aux status et activite des societes mutuelles de la Cochinchine, de Chaudoc, Cap St Jacques, Longxuyen, Mytho, Bentre, Cantho annees 1906-1916” *TĐNK*, TTLTQGII.

When elections were held in 1914, members elected Lương Khắc Ninh to president. When they were held again in 1916, the office shifted to Bùi Quang Chiêu, founder and lifelong leader of the Constitutionalist Party. Passing leadership of the SEM from *Talking Business's* Lương Khắc Ninh to Bùi Quang Chiêu is a metaphor for the decade's elite transition writ large. A year later, Bùi Quang Chiêu teamed up with Nguyễn Phú Khai to establish the French language *La Tribune Indigène*.⁶⁰³ Notably, Khai was already famous for establishing the first Vietnamese-owned rice mill in Mỹ Tho. French and Vietnamese alike explicitly propagandized Nguyễn Phú Khai's mill as a blow to Chinese commercial domination in ways that plainly evoked thematic connections to the Minh Tân Movement.

The roles the SEMs and SICAMs played in the founding of the party are unclear. But by the mid 1920s, the party had absorbed the SEMs. For example, in 1923 Constitutionalist Party activists in Sa Đéc had such control of the local SICAM and SEM that they were able to threaten the agricultural credit access of local elites who didn't contribute to the party's campaign against the Saigon Port Monopoly.⁶⁰⁴ A secret intelligence report written by a "Maître Monin" in 1927 complained that the Constitutionalist Party had absorbed the SEMs and Amicales into the party and were using the power to lobby for the complete elimination of the office of canton chief, who were, in his estimation, "without doubt considered far too often independent of the Constitutionalist Party leaders."⁶⁰⁵ Such a partial and impressionistic account raises more questions than answers. Nevertheless, evidence hints that then ten years from 1917-1927 saw the Constitutionalist Party go from leading the Orchard Heartland Gentry, to struggling against them. It's no surprise that the Delta's middling provincial elite passed over to the Cao Đài movement *en masse*.

Lương Khắc Ninh's political career shows a similarly abrupt fall from grace. He passionately contributed to the 1919 anti-Chinese boycott, giving speeches to drum up support for the anti-Chinese campaigns alongside both old Orchard Heartland friends like *Talking Business* colleague Nguyễn Chánh Sắt and novelist Hồ Biểu Chánh, as well as new allies like Constitutionalist Party founder Nguyễn Phú Khai.⁶⁰⁶ In 1922, he wrote impassioned letters to Emperor Khải Định begging him to take heed of Phan Châu Trinh's criticisms. Thus, from 1917 to 1923 there was little light between his and the Constitutionals' politics.

But he broke with the Constitutionalists over their opposition to French plans for a Port Monopoly in 1923, taking lead of the Vietnamese language pro-government paper *The Impartial* [*Trung Lập Báo*].⁶⁰⁷ By 1926 anticolonialism had gone mainstream, and nationalist Vietnamese reviled Lương Khắc Ninh as a craven toady. An estimated 600 student rioters attacked Ninh's theater troupe in Gò Công during the Phan Châu Trinh funeral protests in 1926.⁶⁰⁸ Huge brawls

⁶⁰³ Smith, "Bui Quang Chiêu and the Constitutionalist Party in French Cochinchina, 1917-30."

⁶⁰⁴ No. 24826 "Dossier relatif à l'attitude de certains fonctionnaires indigènes de Sadec notamment le médecin Pham Van Ngoi dans les circonstances où s'est manifesté une action politique anti-gouvernementale et anti-française," 1923-1931, TDNK, TTLTQG2.

⁶⁰⁵ No. 24785 "Étude du Maître Monin sur l'opposition anti-française en Cochinchine, année 1927," Gouvernement de la Cochinchine, TDNK, TTLTQG2.

⁶⁰⁶ "Lời diễn-thuyết của ông Lương-khắc-Ninh tự Dũ-Thúc tại trường-bát-đường Cầu-quan hôm đêm thứ bảy 30 Août 1919." NCMD 427, September 18, 1919, 14

⁶⁰⁷ Peycam, *The Birth of Vietnamese Political Journalism*; "Scandal Sheets" in Tai, *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution*.

⁶⁰⁸ No. 25650 "Dossier relatif à l'engagement de M. Luong Khac Ninh pour le contrôle de la Presse indigène et aux manifestations contre son troupe théâtral," 1926-1931, TDNK, TTLTQG2.

broke out over multiple nights, with rioters throwing rocks and police discharging their firearms to scatter the crowds. Pamphlets found at the scene justified the riot on the grounds that the “theater troupe belongs to Mr. Luong-khac-Ninh. He is a man of the yellow race but does not share our heart. He has betrayed his country.” The press also sided with the rioters. The leftist *L’Ere Nouvelle* subsequently referred to Ninh as a “simili-patriote.” Even a French writer named Pierre Tedral called him a “vendu”.⁶⁰⁹

Luong Khắc Ninh’s politics hadn’t changed, but he had outlived his political world. In 1928 he wrote a private letter to the Governor General criticizing a wide swath of colonial institutions.⁶¹⁰ His perspectives still resembled those he had relentlessly argued in the pages of *Talking Business* a quarter century before. He obsequiously praised French magnanimity for bringing “very intelligent men [...] I will even say geniuses of broad and liberal ideas to direct and administer the little Annamites”. But he also complained bitterly about the rampant crime and corruption caused by French permissiveness. The state needed to deal more harshly with criminals of all types, but most of all they need to suppress the Chinese and Indians, who were stealing the country’s resources. In his words:

“The Europeans and above all the French reproach the Annamites for not being merchants. But if they are not, it is because no one helps them. Always, whatever business it may be, the preference is given to the Chinese; no attention is paid to the fact that the Annamites are after all the population of the country and not immigrants. They are only apprentice merchants — is it really their fault? There is no commercial school, and they do not have the advances of necessary funds; so when an adjudication of administrative enterprises takes place (Pawnshops etc...) it is always the Chinese who obtain it.”

In the end, the 66-year-old privy council member Luong Khắc Ninh was better at hectoring the Governor General than the 38-year-old Ninh was at hectoring the readership of *Talking Business*. Three years later, in 1931, politically subversive articles were slipping through the Vietnamese press. The French needed a new censor. Someone loyal and erudite enough to detect the subtle political references that had been going over their heads. They reached out to Luong Khắc Ninh, not only because of his intelligence, but also because to help an old ally who “was bordering on penury due to his devotion to our cause.” Thirty years after founding Vietnamese political journalism, Ninh closed his career censoring the press on behalf of the colonial state. They paid him \$150 per month.

⁶⁰⁹ E.N., “De Lachevrotiere contre l’Impartial- Bizarre Coincidence”, *L’Ere Nouvelle*, No.14, October 2, 1926; Pierre Tedral, *La France Devant Le Pacifique. La Comédie Indochinoise* (Editions Vox, n.d.), 63.

⁶¹⁰ The document is undated and badly damaged. However, he seems to mention he is 66 years old, which would place it around 1928. See: No. 25650 "Dossier relatif à l'engagement de M. Luong Khac Ninh pour le contrôle de la Presse indigène et aux manifestations contre son troupe théâtral," 1926–1931, TDNK, TTLTQG2.

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