

The Port City of Haiphong, 1874–1940: The Position of the Chinese Community in a French Colonial City

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Abstract

This article discusses the position of the Chinese community in Haiphong, the largest port city in Northern Vietnam during the French colonial period. The Chinese had arrived and lived in Haiphong, as well as many other places in Vietnam long before the advent of the French. Nevertheless, a large-scale influx of Chinese migrants to Haiphong only happened after the French established colonial rule over Indochina and took full control of the town in the late nineteenth century. Haiphong became a strategic port in the transportation system of French Indochina, as well as within the French colonial empire. In Haiphong, the Chinese gathered in a separate residential quarter having the social and cultural life distinct from the French and Vietnamese communities. Yet, they were actively engaged in various economic activities of the town, notably trade, industry, and financial services. The bombardment and occupation of Haiphong by the Japanese army in late 1940 caused great damages and casualties to the Chinese community. The prolonged warfare and the establishment of the communist regime in Vietnam after 1945 virtually ended the economic hegemony of the Chinese in Haiphong, as well as other cities in Northern Vietnam.

Keywords:
colonial city;
Chinese;
French
Indochina;
Haiphong
Vietnam

Abstrak

Artikel ini membahas tentang posisi masyarakat Tionghoa di Haiphong, kota pelabuhan terbesar di Vietnam Utara pada masa kolonialisme Prancis. Orang-orang Cina telah tiba dan tinggal di Haiphong serta banyak tempat lain di Vietnam jauh sebelum kedatangan orang Prancis. Namun, gelombang besar migran Cina ke Haiphong terjadi setelah Prancis mendirikan pemerintahan kolonial di Indocina dan mengambil kendali penuh atas kota itu pada akhir abad ke-19. Haiphong menjadi pelabuhan strategis dalam sistem transportasi Indochina Prancis dan di dalam kerajaan kolonial Prancis. Di Haiphong, orang Tionghoa berkumpul di tempat tinggal terpisah yang memiliki kehidupan sosial dan budaya yang berbeda dari komunitas Prancis dan Vietnam. Namun, mereka secara aktif terlibat dalam berbagai kegiatan ekonomi kota, terutama perdagangan, perwalian, dan jasa keuangan. Pengeboman dan pendudukan Haiphong oleh tentara Jepang pada akhir 1940 menyebabkan kerusakan besar dan korban jiwa bagi komunitas Tionghoa. Perang yang berkepanjangan dan pembentukan rezim komunis di Vietnam setelah 1945 mengakhiri hegemoni ekonomi Cina di Haiphong serta kota-kota lain di Vietnam Utara.

Kata kunci:
Haiphong
Vietnam;
Indocina
Prancis; kota
kolonial;
Tionghoa

The Establishment of the Colonial Port City of Haiphong

Hai Phong is a coastal city located on the bank of the Cam River, one of the two distributaries of the Thaibinh river system in northern Vietnam. This complex river system connects Haiphong with the interior regions, especially with Thanglong capital (Hanoi today). Moreover, thanks to its geographical proximity to the Gulf of Tonkin and good harbors, Haiphong has favourable conditions to contact with other coastal regions of the country and the outside world. For many centuries, Haiphong served as the leading gateway for foreign trade, as well as the military defensive zone of the country. Yet, it remained as an administrative unit belonging to Haiduong Province for most of the feudal periods (Uy ban Nhan dan thanh pho Hai Phong, 2021: 320-321).

The French invaded Vietnam in 1858. After setting up a government apparatus in South Vietnam, the French promptly sought for a way to penetrate into China. To do this, the French expanded their invasion to North Vietnam which would provide a convenient access to South China. In 1873, the French army led by generals Jean Dupuis and Francis Garnier attacked and occupied Hanoi. Soon after, they attacked nearby provinces such as Hưng Yên, Phú Lý, Hải Dương, Ninh Bình, and Nam Định. In the face of the French successive victories, in 1874, the Nguyen dynasty officially signed a treaty with the French in which the Vietnamese authority agreed to open the port of Haiphong and allowed the garrison of French troops there. From this first military post, the French gradually extended their control to all over the northeastern coastal area.

On July 19th, 1888, the Governor-General of Indochina issued a decree officially establishing the city councils of Hanoi and Haiphong. The city council of Haiphong was headed by a mayor who also worked as the council chairman and 14 commissioners.¹ Hải Phòng officially became a first-class city (*ville*) on par with Hanoi and Saigon. On October 1st, 1888, the Nguyen court signed a decree completely ceding Haiphong to the French. The French quickly developed Haiphong to serve as Indochina's main naval base and international sea port which connected Tonkin (North Vietnam) with other parts of Indochina and the world.

The Establishment of the Chinese Community in Haiphong

As written above, thanks to its favourable location for international trade, foreign vessels had long arrived in Haiphong. From there, foreign traders followed the Cam River to penetrate to other parts of North Vietnam. Under the Nguyen dynasty (1802-1945), however, Vietnam conducted a closed-door policy, restricting the country's foreign trade and diplomatic relations.

1) Decree on the establishment of the Hải Phòng City, in the Collection of *Moniteur du Protectorat de l'Annam et du Tonkin*, Vietnam National Archive, Center Number One, Document code J142, pp.392-401.

Although the policy aimed at Western nationals, Chinese traders also had difficulties traveling to the inland regions. Many of them decided to settle down in Haiphong (UBNDTp.Haiphong, 2021: 320). When the Nguyen court agreed to open the port in 1874 following the French pressure, Haiphong again became the gateway for foreigners to enter North Indochina. The subsequent development of Haiphong, especially after the French established their colonial authority there in 1888 and turned it into a strategic port city increasingly attracted the arrivals of the Chinese. The large-scale influx of Chinese migrants into Haiphong in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries coincided with the political instability in China following the Opium wars (1839-1843, 1856-1860). Taiping revolution (1851-1864) and the Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895). As a result, Chinese residents in Hai Phong mainly originated from Guangzhou, Guangdong, and Fujian, the regions which were seriously affected by the warfares.

Population

In Haiphong, the Chinese lived in a residential area separated from the French and Vietnamese residents. In fact, the French also divided the city into three different quarters for the French, the Chinese, and the Vietnamese. According to a statistic by the French authority, in 1888, Haiphong had a total population of about 10,000, including 9,600 Vietnamese, 200 European and 200 Chinese people (Gilles Raffi, 1994). This shows that at the time when Haiphong became a colonial city, the number of the Chinese was equal to those of Europeans who were mainly the French. In 1893, the city's population increased to 15,000, consisting of 400 Chinese, 14,000 Vietnamese, and 600 Europeans. In 1905, the whole city had a population of 18,427, including 11,000 Vietnamese, 1,000 Europeans, 6,300 Chinese, 45 Japanese, and 32 Indian people. The growth of the population in Hai Phong was higher than that of Hanoi and Saigon. In 1926, for instance, Hai Phong's population was 100,473 people, while Hanoi had 101,858, Saigon 108,566 and Cholon 191,473. This data shows that Hai Phong has become an economic center, attracting a large number of residents (as much as Hanoi, Saigon), especially the growth of the Chinese population (Figure 1).

The number of Chinese residents increased significantly at the turn of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century. There were only 200 Chinese people in Haiphong in 1888. But the number increased to 2,500 in 1892, 3,300 in 1894 and 5,500 in 1896 (UBNDTp.Haiphong, 2021, Vol.3, 32). After the Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895), a great number of Chinese people migrated to Haiphong, making the number of Chinese residents higher than that of European residents in the city and putting more competitive pressure on the Vietnamese community. According to a statistic made by the city public security department, between 1926 and 1939

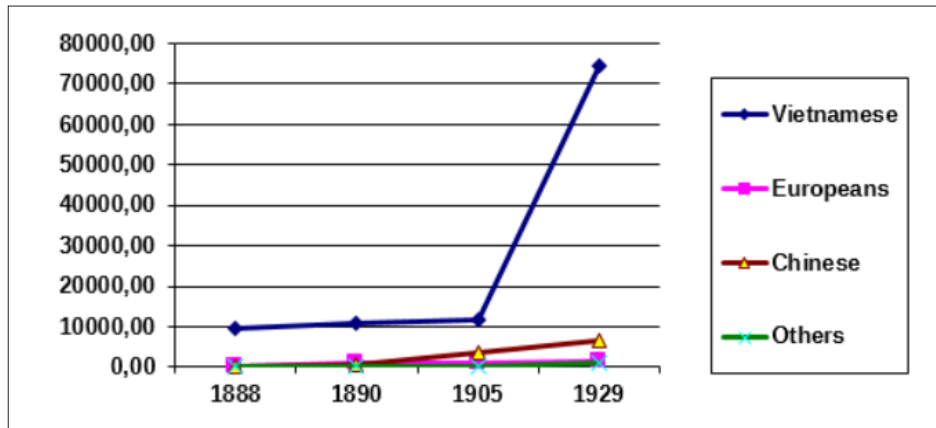


Figure 1. Haiphong's population during the French colonial rule. **Source:** Ngo Dang Loi, 1993: 20.

there were 1,413 Chinese migrants to Haiphong. The Chinese community in Haiphong rose accordingly from 6,350 people in 1905 to 8,523 in 1913, 10,250 in 1920, 13,538 in 1923, 14,301 in 1926 and over 20,000 in 1929. The Chinese became the second most populous community in Haiphong after the indigenous Vietnamese.

Living Areas

In 1874, the French arrived in Haiphong and began to exploit this region. In Haiphong, the French consulate was located next to the confluence of the Tam Bac Rivers and Cam Rivers, and there were three traditional Vietnamese military posts (the post on the left bank had been left unoccupied). In addition, there were villages and two ancient pagodas along the banks of the Cam River (Figure 2).

After 10 years, the map of 1884 shows that the French consulate was expanded widely; the first streets named Paul Bert and Francis Garnier were opened. There were wharfs and warehouses in the port area. There was a specific legend on the living area of Chinese residents along the banks of the Tam Bac River. The rest of the city were fields and marshes (Figure 3).

In 1885, the French envoy Bonnal permitted the digging of the belt canal (also known as the Bonnal Canal) and made the planning of Haiphong urban area. In 1888, Haiphong city was established and divided into three distinct areas: concession area, Chinese resident area, and Vietnamese resident area. In the concession area, the Europeans (mainly French) opened perpendicular streets, named after French leaders and officers such as Paul Bert, Henri Rivière, Harmand, Francis Garnier, etc. The Vietnamese resident community lived in surrounding villages and was separated by the Bonnal canal and the Tam Bac and Cam rivers (Figure 4).

The Chinese community was concentrated in the area between the Tam Bac River and the belt canal and opened main streets, including Tonkinoise, Chavassieux, and Commerce, and small cross streets, such as Bac



Figure 2. Map of Haiphong in 1874. **Source:** Hai Phong City Library.

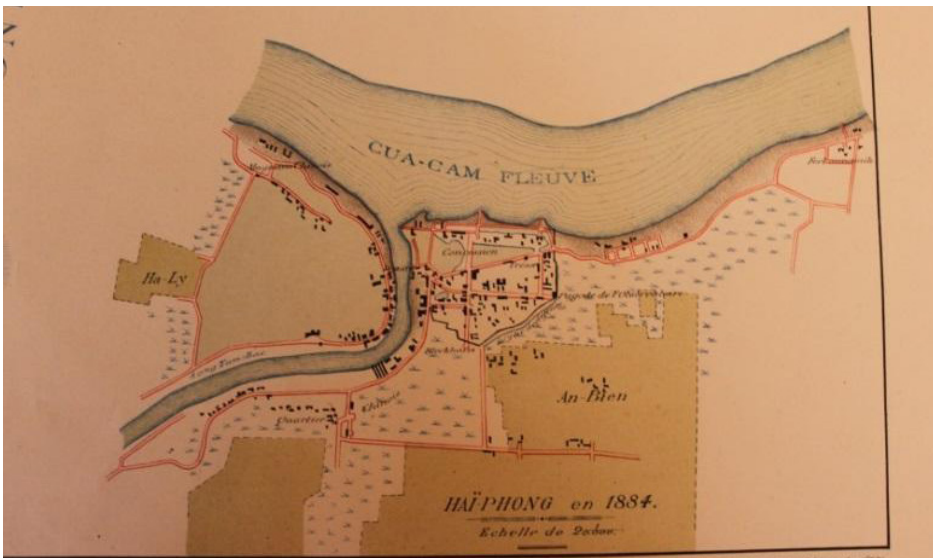


Figure 3. Map of Haiphong in 1884. **Source:** Hai Phong City Library

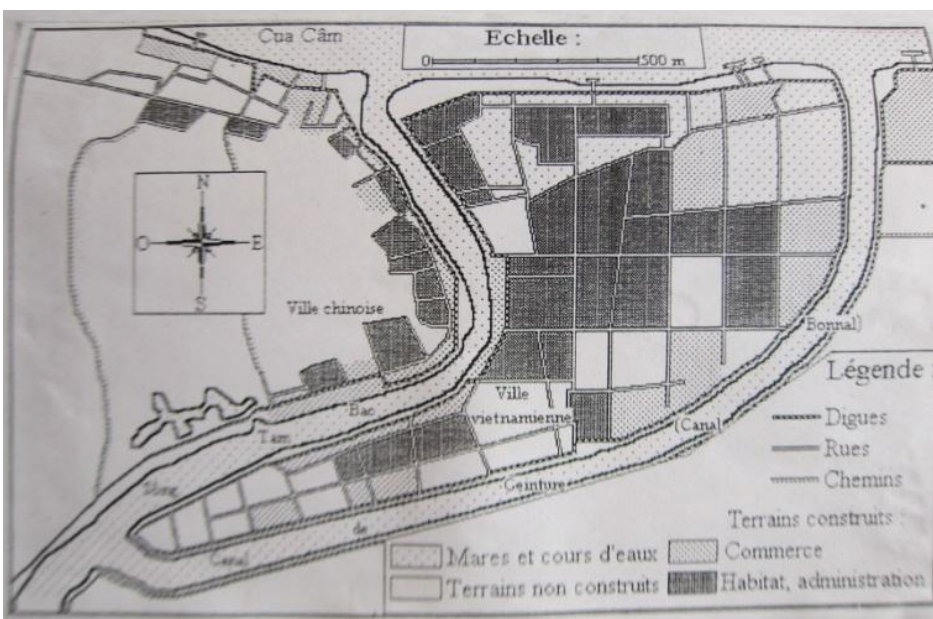


Figure 4. Map of Haiphong in 1884. **Source:** Hai Phong City Museum.

Ninh, Formose, Sai Gon, Pagode, Fou Tchéou, etc. Although this area was not large, it was properly planned. For this reason, a lot of trading vessels arrived in the area.

Administrative Organization

In the process of accomplishing the organizational structure and administrative management, the French successively established in Haiphong the Provisional Council (*commission municipale provisoire*) in January 1886, the Consultative Commission (*commission municipale consultative des villes*) in June 1886, and the Definitive Commission (*commission municipale définitive*) in July 1888. Representatives of all three main groups of residents, i.e. Europeans (French), Chinese, Vietnamese participated in these commissions. The majority of the commissions were always Europeans. For example, the Consultative Commission had 16 people, of which 12 were Europeans, 3 were Chinese and 1 was Vietnamese². The Definitive Commission had 15 members, of which 11 were French, 2 Chinese and 2 Vietnamese³.

In brief, even if a city commission had equal distributions of groups of residents, the French enjoyed all political rights. The French shared an interest with the Chinese to control certain areas. They allowed the Chinese Trade Society to handle civil cases in the Chinese community, while French policies only dealt with criminal cases, security, and politics. The Vietnamese community had very limited political rights, including those who sit in the city commission.

Colonial administration also discriminated against 3 communities of urban residents. The French, European and Vietnamese who are naturalized in French were protected by political, economic, and civil benefits. Overseas Chinese were entitled to regulations of foreigners and were protected by the government for real estate rights. They were entitled to take part in economic activities in association with the French, but were subject to poll-tax.

Despite their moderate political role, the Chinese enjoyed certain privileges to benefit from the colonial market. A number of Chinese large enterprises had their market shares in Haiphong becoming partners, even competitors, to French firms. However, a large part of the Chinese community was poor urban residents, who migrated to Haiphong to survive and seek jobs. They did all kinds of jobs, such as restaurants, pharmacies, small businesses, rickshaw drag, and freight transport. They built their own trade society, Buddhist temple, private schools serving their own community.

2) Decree of Governor General of Indochina establishing Hai Phong's Consultative Commission in 22/6/1886, Vietnam National Archive, Center Number One, Document code In the file No 267

3) Decree of Governor General of Indochina establishing Hai Phong's Definitive Commission in 19/7/1888, in *Moniteur du Protectorat de l'Annam et du Tonkin*, Vietnam National Archive, Center Number One, Document code In the file No. J142

The life of the Chinese community along the Tam Bac River was described by Mayor Merlo as “In Chinese quarter, the roads are narrow and crowded with people. A chaotic but always animated life” (Nguyen Nam, 1987: 18).

Economic, Cultural and Social Life

Economic Life

As written above, the Chinese had long conducted trade in Haiphong. However, their businesses flourished after the French occupied the town and Haiphong port was open for foreigners in 1874. The Chinese established streets and shops on the right bank of the Tam Bac River, which were commonly known to Vietnamese people as Khach (Chinese) quarter. In addition to the small traders who traded meat, fish and rice, there were new occupations. The Tan Hoi (Cantonese) traded rice, the Nanhai (Panyu) opened restaurants, the Foshan (Cantonese) opened pharmacy to sell Chinese traditional medicine, the Fujian produced confectionary. According to a report of the Hai Phong’s consul in 1880, the number of Chinese mechanical ships landing at the port station accounted for 23.5% of the total ships’ tonnage of all countries, not to mention 205 sailboats.

In the period of 1874-1888, the role of the French trading vessels in Haiphong was rather unclear. From September 1875 to June 1876, Haiphong port received 20 British, German and Chinese ships, but no French ships. From 1875 to 1882, of the 596 vessels of different nationalities entering Haiphong port, there were only 65 French ships (accounting for 10.9%) with a total tonnage of 28,381 tons (accounting for 8.26 % of the total tonnage of the landed boat) (Gilles Raffi, 1994).

According to a statistic made by Tsuboi, in the first 6 months of 1877, there were 168 Chinese ships coming to Hai Phong with a total tonnage of 5,571 tons and 131 ships leaving with a total tonnage of 4,236 tons (Yoshiharu Tsuboi (1993): 306). On the other hand, Chinese merchants in Hong Kong often hired British ships to carry goods for them. They had their own warehouses located in the northern part of the Cam River, which extended hundreds square meters.⁴

After setting up the economic base, the Chinese manipulated the market in Haiphong systematically and had a great influence on domestic transport, mining and construction sectors. The French government collaborated with the Chinese to control the city. They offered a preferential treatment to the Chinese in issuing licenses, reducing import and export taxes, and establishing banks. According to a research of Pham Xuan Thanh, there

4) This warehouses were later seized by the French troops for the military purposes. The governor of Tonkin stated that the ownership of this land belonged to the Chinese in accordance with the decision of the An Nam government in 1879. *Moniteur du Protectorat de l’Annam et du Tonkin*, Vietnam National Archive, Center Number One, Document code In the file No. 59134.

were 21 predominant Chinese merchants in Haiphong in the late nineteenth century. Most of them were engaged in trading rice. Others were involved in the import and export of controlled trade of vegetables, fruits, luxury goods, porcelain, and weapons (Ban Nghien cuu lich su Hai Phong, 1988: 33).

During the first decades of the twentieth century, Chinese merchants became more and more involved in the fields of the colonial mining program in Haiphong. They also invested in industry, repair mechanics, shipbuilding, transportation, trade, and financial services. In 1899, a Chinese named Hop Tai Long was licensed to establish a mechanical workshop under his name with an initial capital of 61,000 francs and 190 workers. In 1917, the mechanic workshop of another Chinese person named Quang Xuong Long was established with a capital of 4,000 francs and 190 workers. In 1920, the workshop of mechanical repair and milling of Quang Tai Long was established with 210 workers. Other prominent Chinese shops in Haiphong included the tanning workshops and textile workshops owned by Lung Van Ky, the workshop of porcelain and flowered enameled tiles owned by Tan Tai Mau, Chinese traditional medicine shops of Nhi Thien Duong, Bao An Duong, Vinh Sinh Duong, Pho Te, printing workshops owned by My Long, Hoa Duong Loi, Tan Phuc Hoa goat soap, Hoa Dong rubber workshop, Hop An shoe workshop, etc. Two big Chinese banks, i.e Bank China and Bank Transportation also had branches in Haiphong. The Chinese also controlled auction services, hotels and were allowed to opium dens and cinemas. According to a statistic, in the early twentieth century, the Chinese had 7 large hotels, 2 dance halls, 2 cinemas and 4 opium dens in Haiphong. They also bought land in the rural area of Kien An to establish rice plantations. It is recorded that in 1925, there were two prominent Chinese landlords in Haiphong, i.e. Nam Sinh with a large rice field and Lung Chiong Hoi who owned a rice milling factory and 54 hectares of rice land in Kien An (Ban Nghien cuu lich su Hai Phong, 1988: 33).

In 1939, the French colonial government accepted the formation of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce in Tonkin. The Chamber had 21 members and its headquarters was in Hanoi. The establishment of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce assured the interests of the overseas Chinese business community in Indochina (Ban Nghien cuu lich su Hai Phong, 1988:34). . From mid-1939, the means of transport on the railways, roads, and waterways from Haiphong to Yunnan was fully exploited. The Yunnan company alone transported goods from Haiphong to China at an average of 19,000 tons per month. The Chinese-owned Tai Phat Company had a strong influence on the import and export of Haiphong port.

Although receiving certain privileges, the Chinese were not allowed to invest in a number of businesses which might harm the interests of the French capitalists, such as international shipping. Their investment in mining and rice

trade were gradually restricted by the colonial government. The relationship between the French authorities and the Chinese merchants worsened in late 1927. An anti-Chinese movement of the Vietnamese broke out which lasted several days and killed and injured a number of the Chinese. The Chinese Trade Society in Haiphong sent the letter to the Chinese government asking to send warships to protect its citizens. In 1928, the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of China Chu Chao Hsin informed the French authorities in Indochina about damages that Chinese businesses in Hai Phong had suffered and demanded compensation from the French authorities.

The French authorities investigated and reported that 69 Chinese companies, shops and ships were damaged by the anti-Chinese movement in Haiphong, while most French companies were unharmed. In 1930, the Chinese government signed with the French colonial authorities the Nanjing Convention which protected the interests of Chinese businessmen in Indochina. Nevertheless, the World Economic Crisis of 1929-1933 had prevented the Chinese businesses in Haiphong from recovering. Instead, many Chinese merchants suffered a great loss and a number of companies went bankrupt, most notably Shun Tai company, one of the largest Chinese firms in Hai Phong.

After the economic crisis of 1929-1933, French Indochina's economy in general and Haiphong in particular was restored. This did not last long as the Japanese troops entered North Indochina in September 1940 on the eve of the Asia-Pacific War. Indochina had an important position in the Second Sino-Japanese war, which broke out in 1937. Most war materials were supplied to China through Indochina by two routes, the Haiphong-Yunnan railway and the Hanoi – Dong Dang railway. When Japanese demands to close the transit of military supplies to China were rejected by the French authorities, the French attacked North Indochina. After a few days of conflicts, the French colonial government signed a treaty with the Japanese allowing Japanese troops to be stationed in northern Indochina. As Haiphong city was put under the control of the Japanese army, the Chinese businesses there were seriously harmed. On 26 September 1940, when the Japanese troops entered Haiphong, it was estimated that 500 Chinese people fled to Yunnan and Hong Kong. The Japanese almost immediately confiscated those Chinese businesses which had been trading with China. The Chinese banks in northern Indochina were closed down (Pham Van Thuy, 2018 : 166-167). It is noted that the Japanese occupation of Indochina marked the end of the Chinese economic hegemony in Haiphong.

Cultural and Social Life

The Chinese community in Haiphong was concentrated in the area bounded by the Tam Bac River and the belt canal, which later expanded into neighboring areas. The Chinese quarter has always been referred to as the

busiest, noisiest place. Paul Bonnetian in the book *L'Extrême-Orient* published in 1887 described that in Haiphong the streets were diverse and arbitrary, the trading activities of the overseas Chinese merchants were busy, bustling, spectacular and also filthy. Traveling is difficult because of crowded, narrow streets and high frequency of taking a boat, and the river rolled up wastes on the road to make the road slippery, fishy smell. In the early twentieth century, life in the Chinese residential areas did not change much. Writer Nguyen Hong wrote in his book that the residents living on the banks of Tam Bac conducted "cooking, bathing, and building a latrine right next to the house." (Ngo Dang Loi, 1993: 232)

The Chinese community in Haiphong showed their strong solidarity. The Chinese Trade Society was responsible for collaborating with the Chinese people in Haiphong. The Society's headquarter was located at the Tam Ba Temple, where Mother Goddess, the guardian of fishermen, was worshiped. Therefore, the Society was not only to protect the economic interests of the Chinese people, but also to serve religious purposes. In addition, the Society regularly organized social and ceremonial activities. At the Tam Ba Temple, there were public spaces for training and playing sports. The Chinese established hospitals and schools for their own community, such as the Guangdong Hospital, the Dong An Primary School, the Kieu Tieu School, the Chinese Primary school, and the Khiet Trinh Girls School.

The Chinese community in Haiphong had their distinct cultural life. Their cuisines were well known among the local people with typical dishes, such as porridge, tofu, steamed glutinous rice, dumpling, wonton, ravioli soup, sweet green bean soup, sausage, and roasted pork, chicken, duck, and goose. The Chinese food court located in the area from the intersection of Tonkinoise street to Chavassieux boulevard was the busiest place in the town and Chinese restaurants were always crowded at night. Residential architecture in Chinatown was characterized by the tube houses and the "yin-yang" roofs⁵. The Chinese also used their own houses as the shops, so the front part of the house and space were used for retail purposes. The typical Chinese tube house was long and had two or three floors, each with a balcony. There were a number of slum houses along the banks of the Bonnal Canal owned by the Chinese. This type of house had one part attached to the bank of the river; the other part expanded to the edge of the water and was stabilized on stilts made by bamboo. Except for the Tam Ba Temple, which was maintained until today and kept with the traditional architectural style of the Chinese community in Haiphong, other Chinese houses and architectures were destroyed during consecutive wars and political turmoil in Vietnam's modern history.

In conclusion, beginning as an administrative unit belonging to

5) yin-yang roof : a typical Chinese roof with 2 overlapping layers



Figure 5.
Chinatown in
Haiphong in the
early twentieth
century.
Source: Hai
Phong City
Museum

the neighbouring Haiduong province, thanks to its strategic location and favourable natural conditions, Haiphong attracted the great attention of foreigners who came to trade, work and live there. Although a small number of the Chinese had long lived in Haiphong, the significant migrations of the Chinese into Haiphong only took place in the late nineteenth century. The large-scale influx of the Chinese had turned Haiphong from a small fishing village and a trade port into a thriving commercial town. Under the administration of the French colonial government since 1888, Haiphong quickly emerged to become one of the three biggest cities in Indochina on par with Hanoi and Saigon during the French colonial period. This in turn attracted more Chinese migrants. In the early twentieth century, Chinese migrants became the second largest residential group in the city after the indigenous Vietnamese. Throughout the course of history, the Chinese had built their own distinctive economic, cultural and social life. They contributed significantly to the development and vibrancy of the colonial city of Haiphong.

The invasion of the Japanese army in Haiphong in late 1940 and their subsequent anti-Chinese actions caused a great number of casualties and a general exodus of the Chinese out of the city. It is safe to say that the Japanese occupation of Indochina in 1940 virtually brought to an end the prominent position of the Chinese community in Haiphong.

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6) *Moniteur du Protectorat de l'Annam et du Tonkin* (Vietnam National Archive, Center Number One).

7) *Journal officiel de l'Indochine française* (Vietnam National Archive, Center Number One).