

## **The Policy of the Cochinchina Government (Vietnam) to Attract Overseas Chinese (from 1600 to 1777)**

Huynh Ngoc Dang<sup>1</sup>, Cao Dai Tri<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Doctor of history

<sup>1</sup>Institute of Cultural History - Hunan Normal University (China)

---

**Abstract:** *Aiming at building a powerful administration to survive and secede, Nguyen clan in Cochinchina was smart and skillful in implementing policies to attract significant resources to serve the reclamation in southern Vietnam, build a prosperous kingdom of Cochinchina and even go further: to create a position to counterbalance and balance the political-military power with Siam (Thailand) in the Indochina Peninsula. One of the critical resources that the feudal government in Cochinchina smartly enlisted and attracted is the Chinese immigrant groups living in Vietnam.*

**Keywords:** *Cochinchina government, Nguyen clan, Chinese, Policy, Vietnam.*

---

### **I. Overview of the Migration of Chinese to Cochinchina.**

It is possible to generalize the process of Chinese migration toward Cochinchina into three following stages:

**Phase 1:** From the end of the 16th century to the year 1645.

This period has two main events affecting the migration of Chinese to Cochinchina, namely: In 1567, Longqing Emperor (China) issued an ordinance allowing his civilians to go abroad for trading after almost 200 years of maintaining maritime order banning (Vietnamese: Thôn bản bắt hạ hải) - do not give permission for an inch of wood to overseas. The second event was Nguyen Hoang's returning to Thuan - Quang in 1600, began to implement the idea of secession. Thus, China opened a border gate for Chinese people to migrate legally; the seaports in Thuan - Quang did also open to welcome overseas Chinese because Nguyen lords were trying to develop foreign trade to satisfy the needs of Cochinchina. Therefore, many Chinese merchant ships came to trade with Thuan - Quang many of them stayed in Cochinchina for long-term business, especially in Hoi An (Fai-Fo) and Thuan Hoa centers.

**Phase 2:** From 1645 to 1685

Starting when military Manchu conquered China, basically set the rule; and then in 1678, when the Qing Dynasty ordered the (Vietnamese: Hải giới) forcing the coastal people to move inland and banning maritime traffic. A remarkable event during this period was in August 1645, the Manchu court ordered "(Vietnamese: Chi phát nghiêm chi)", forcing Chinese people to follow Manchu custom like shaving their heads, keeping pigtail pigtails; at the same time enforcing strict and harsh policies. Many Chinese considered the Manchu law was offending Chinese culture. Dissatisfied with the current regime, those people left their country for asylum; some moved to Cochinchina. Typical for these migrant victims is the case of Trinh Hoi (the grandfather of Trinh Hoai Duc).

Second, in Taiwan, after the resistance against the Qing led by Zheng Cheng Gong failed, many former officials of the Ming Dynasty migrated to Cochinchina to settle permanently. Typically for this group was the army of 3,000 soldiers with over 50 ships commanded by Tran Thuong Xuyen, Duong Ngan Dich.

**Stage 3:** From 1685 onwards

A remarkable event was in 1685, Kāngxī Emperor promulgated "Triển hải lệnh," allowing people to go abroad for trading. A large number of Chinese, who were mostly civilians migrating for livelihoods and other reasons, came to settle in Cochinchina during this period. The Chinese immigrants to Cochinchina during this period were mostly not war victims or Ming's former officials.

In the three phases mentioned above, the most notable is the second one with a large number of immigrants was Ming exile officials. However, phase 3, from 1685 onwards is also crucial: the persistent war lasting for more than 40 years between the Trinh and Nguyen families has ended in equilibrium, socio-political situation has been relatively stable; a vast territory stretching from Thuan-Quang to Ca Mau was waiting for human labor to come from all directions; Cochinchina's foreign trade was growing to its peak, etc. All of this creates a strong attraction for overseas Chinese, making Cochinchina a suitable land for people to converge. Since then, the Chinese communities have also formed and developed gradually such as Minh Huong Association, Thanh Ha Town in Thuan Hoa, Hoi An, Tran Bien, Phien Tran, and Ha Tien.

The current socio-economic context and essential characteristics of the overseas Chinese were a critical basis for the Nguyen feudal government to make appropriate policies towards the Chinese in Cochinchina.

---

## **II. The Policy of Attracting Overseas Chinese of the Cochinchina Government.**

### **1. Priority Policies on Entry and Residence**

The Chinese immigrated to Cochinchina mainly by maritime routes, through Hoi An and Thuan Hoa ports; later were ports in Cu Lao Pho, Saigon, My Tho, and Ha Tien. In order to facilitate trade and entry, the Cochinchina government created the most favorable conditions for all merchant ships, mainly Chinese ones. This can be seen through Cochinchina's treatment of former Ming officials, Tran Thuong Xuyen and Duong Ngan Dich, those who docked at Tu Dung and Da Nang (Tourane) seaports with two massive armies consisting of 50 boats and more than 3,000 men.

In the registration of newcomers, the Cochinchina feudal government closely coordinated with guilds of local Chinese people. This was recorded by Le Quy Don in the book "Frontier Chronicles" as follows: "...If the storm has damaged the boat, the government counted the number of guests, and Administration Commissioner assigned the guild to look after the victims..."<sup>(1)</sup>. In the charter of Duong Thuong Guild in Hoi An, this relationship is clearly described by particular decrees.

In addition to addressing aspirations and refugee claims, immigration in Cochinchina was also linked to addressing cultural and economic exchange needs. With trade visitors, immigration regulations were quite strict with many inspection procedures for goods and personalities. However, with talented individuals from China, easy entry and respectful rules were implemented.

The policy of attracting Chinese immigrants is also expressed through facilitating location and residence procedures. In a little more detail, the Nguyen lords allowed the Chinese to reside in separate focus points; those are administrative units named Minh Huong or Thanh Ha in Thuan Hoa, Hoi An, Tran Bien, Phien Tran, Ha Tien. For the newcomers, those who resided in the short-term mostly lived in Thanh Ha Town or Thanh Ha Town or other immigrant sites. These concentrated residence places often formed naturally in zones of economic exchanges. The Cochinchina government formalized these locations administratively. Historically, Cochinchina authorities have never imposed a place of residence or forced immigrants to leave natural habitat locations to government-designated sites. The residential places of overseas Chinese in Thuan-Quang were located at the center of economic and cultural exchanges, while the others in Tran Bien, Phien Tran, Ha Tien, etc. also held the position of the marginal defense posts, supporting security for the reclamation, creating a defensive position to protect the integrity of national sovereignty. That important position was not due to chance. The clearheaded vision and assertiveness of the "Wisdom Lord" (Nguyen Phuc Tan) when receiving and settling the two exile groups of the Ming dynasty was the foundation of the initial strategic intent of using Chinese groups as strategic forces in the frontier regions. History has proved that Nguyen Phuc Tan's strategy was entirely right and brings excellent results.

Also, the Cochinchina government supported overseas Chinese to establish associations of fellow-countrymen, professional associations; allowed them to marry Vietnamese women or to travel throughout Cochinchina territories, etc. Mac Thien Tu was given a hat, coat and dragon boat like a royal member along with the full authority to govern Ha Tien; his descendants would be different substitution successor forever.

All of these events show that the Nguyen Lords created many favorable conditions for overseas Chinese to attract and entice them to settle and live in Cochinchina.

### **2. Preferential Policies for Economic**

First of all, the Chinese were trusted by the Cochinchina administration to consume important local products with substantial revenues exclusively. At the same time, they were entrusted with the exclusive right to supply the goods and equipment that the Cochinchina government preferred or needed. Le Quy Don recorded the monopoly of buying and selling pepper of overseas Chinese as follows: "...Every year, on the second half of May, Nguyen sent the captain of Tan Nhat boat and soldiers to localities; ordered people, depending on the size of each garden, divided into bags, set prices to buy, a burden of pepper costs five coins (Vietnamese: quan tiền); transported to Thanh Ha Town for selling to Chinese tourists, not allowed local people to sell separately... One hundred pounds of pepper were equivalent to 1 quintal, price 5 - 6 coins. Chinese and Macao guests often brought their newly purchased goods to Guangdong..."<sup>(2)</sup>. Other products such as areca, frankincense, bird's nest... that the Lord's monopoly of exploiting and purchasing also assigned Chinese consumers. Exclusive Chinese merchants also supplied the consumer goods of the Nguyen royal family including muslin, fabric, brocade, bronze, porcelain, copper, and other metal and luxury goods.

The Chinese were also allowed by the Cochinchina government to prioritize gold mining. The Chinese were also assigned priority over gold mining, coining, and making unique things such as "... hanging lights, organizing parties on special days, composing parallel sentences for Tet or casual events, lighting wax, peeling

---

<sup>1</sup> Lê Quý Đôn (1964), *Phủ biên Tạp lục* (Frontier Chronicles), Social Sciences Publishing House, Hanoi, P. 256.

<sup>2</sup> Lê Quý Đôn (1964), *Phủ biên Tạp lục* (Frontier Chronicles), Social Sciences Publishing House, Hanoi, P. 354.

cinnamon...”<sup>(3)</sup>. Documents show that the Chinese had a close relationship with Trung Phuoc Loan, acquiring gold processing workshop (Vietnamese: Thuộc Kim Hộ), those who were specializing in gold mining for the state and monopolizing gold consumption annually<sup>(4)</sup>. In 1746, under Martial Lord (Nguyen Phuc Khoat) regime, a Chinese man whose first name was Huang was allowed to monopolize casting of white zinc coin.

In particular, Chinese people have also given priority to work in Ship Management Agencies (Vietnamese: Tàu Vụ Ty). Cheng Chinh Ho remarked while he was surveying Thanh Ha Town in Thuan Hoa as follows: “...Because the Chinese merchants and overseas Chinese in Hoi An were mostly educated, knowledgeable in foreign trade ... so Nguyen Lord often entrusted them with particular tasks. For example, the positions of Cai Tàu, Tri Tàu, Cai Bộ Tàu, Ký Lục, interpreter, and other officials relating to Ship Management Agencies. There was a principle all these positions must be undertaken by inhabitants of Minh Huong and Thanh Ha Associations”<sup>(5)</sup>.

In a 1788 report by two Quang Nam officials, there were some Chinese in Minh Huong Association who held prominent positions in Ship Management Agencies like “(Vietnamese: ... Công Bộ đốc Lý Chiến Tàu Mỹ Thiện Hầu Lý Mỹ Quan, Cai Bạ Tri Tàu Vụ Lộc Tiên Hầu Hứa Hiến Thủy, Cai Phủ Tàu Tài Đức Bắc Trương Kinh Tài...”<sup>(6)</sup>.

Incentives for the Chinese in the field of economy, import-export business, mining, coinage, management of tax collection of foreign merchant ships... demonstrating the Nguyen Lords’ policy of tolerance and respectful consciousness to promote potential strengths of overseas Chinese.

### **3. The policy of respect and regular promotion of natural, cultural integration.**

Needless to say, the Cochinchina government never had a rule that required the Chinese to give up their customs. In Unification Records of Gia Dinh, vol. IV (recording on traditions), Trinh Hoai Duc recorded the details that Cochinchina always respected the culture and beliefs of overseas Chinese and other immigrants: “Foreigners came from many countries and intermingled with each other, but their clothes and utensils kept their own customs...”. Regarding written and verbal languages: “The Gia Dinh people while talking to each other often used to some Chinese and Khmer words; listeners who were familiar with it also understood, regardless the words came from other languages...” Particularly, in Phien An town: “Houses, clothes, furniture, were almost like in China... Majority of people understood the voice of Fujian, Guangdong and Chaozhou provinces...”<sup>(7)</sup>.

In Overseas Memoir, Thich Dai San's record of Hoi An shows that houses, roads, and living styles... were all Chinese-like. Other documents written about Ha Tien, Cu Lao Pho, and Saigon market ... were all similar. This shows that the Chinese culture of immigrants was respected, with no constraints or prohibitions.

Nguyen Lords encouraged the process of natural integration on the basis of respecting the individual culture of every group of residents, normalizing living communication activities, exchanging and absorbing each other's cultural quintessence, in the context of all ethnic groups participated in the reclamation and fought to protect the achievements of labor.

Cultural integration with indigenous inhabitants in a natural way is a striking feature of Chinese communities in Cochinchina. It is also a result of the policy of respecting Chinese Buddhist and Confucian intellectuals inherited from the Ly and Tran dynasties. Some famous Chinese monks came to Cochinchina where they were treated with great respect by Nguyen Lords. They contributed to the formation of two sects of Cochinchina Buddhist those are Lam Te and Tao Dong. The Nguyen Lords in Cochinchina admired Buddhism and enthusiastically supported the Dharma. A series of large and small pagodas were built in Cochinchina according to the idea and material support of the Lord's family. Some generations of Nguyen Lords followed Buddhism and were given different titles such as (Vietnamese: Minh vương Nguyễn Phước Chu đạo hiệu Cư Sĩ Hưng Long - Thiên Túng Đạo Nhân; chúa Nguyễn Phước Trú - Vân Tuyên Đạo Nhân; Võ vương Nguyễn Phúc Khoát - Từ Tế Đạo nhân...).

The Confucian intellectuals from China were also welcomed and favored by the Cochinchina government. That is the case of Zhou Shun Shui (Vietnamese: Chu Thuần Thủy), a Chinese “(Vietnamese: trung sĩ”)<sup>(8)</sup>, who claimed to be an exile official of the Ming Dynasty, who came to Cochinchina many times,

<sup>3</sup> Cheng Chinh Ho (Trần Kinh Hòa) (1960), Mấy điều nhận xét về Minh Hương xã ở Hội An (Some Remarks on the Minh Huong Association in Hoi An), Vietnam Journal of Archeology, Issue 1, Saigon. P. 107.

<sup>4</sup> Lê Quý Đôn (1964), Phủ biên Tạp lục (Frontier Chronicles), Social Sciences Publishing House, Hanoi, P. 248.

<sup>5</sup> Cheng Chinh Ho (Trần Kinh Hòa) (1958), The Mac Family and Nguyen Lords in Ha Tien, Journal of Asian Cultures, Issue 70, P. 105.

<sup>6</sup> Cheng Chinh Ho (Trần Kinh Hòa) (1960), Mấy điều nhận xét về Minh Hương xã ở Hội An (Some Remarks on the Minh Huong Association in Hoi An), Vietnam Journal of Archeology, Issue 1, Saigon. P. 18.

<sup>7</sup> Trịnh Hoài Đức (1998), Gia Định Thành thông chí (Unification Records of Gia Dinh), Vol. 4, Education Publishing House, Hanoi, P. 121.

<sup>8</sup> “Trung sĩ” is a term that refers to talented people who were appointed to be mandarins who must not pass complicated examinations like other feudal officials.

the most extended stay was four years, from 1654-1658, under Wisdom Lord Nguyen Phuoc Tan. During Zhou Shun Shui's time in Cochinchina, many mandarins and even Wisdom Lord visited and exchanged letters with him to learn about various aspects of academics with respect and serious attitude.

It is also the case of Chinese poet writers who come to Ha Tien to participate in the "Chieu Anh Cac" poet forum of Mac Thien Tu. The full names of these 29 characters were meticulously recorded by Trinh Hoai Duc in the Unification Records of Gia Dinh. They were warmly welcomed by the authorities of Ha Tien and Cochinchina intellectuals such as Phan Dai Quang, Nguyen Nghi, Tran Ngoan, Dang Minh Ban, Le Ba Binh... to discuss great books and Ha Tien landscape. In particular, a Cochinchina's reputation illustrious mandarin, Nguyen Cu Trinh, also joined the poet group to work on poems about ten beautiful attractions of Ha Tien.

Of Chinese Confucian intellectuals who came to Cochinchina, some worked as volunteer teachers for poor young people at schools; some worked on paper records, others became guests of local officials and the royal family.... In general, they were respected by the government and Cochinchina people. They significantly contributed to promoting the establishment of Cochinchina's cultural centers in the bustling cities. The Confucian school of Cochinchina, although initially formed and developed, was in the degenerate period of Confucianism in Vietnam in general, but itself had a distinct physique.

In summary, Cochinchina's policy for overseas Chinese is very different from that of Tonkin, which is always respectful, friendly and not culturally oppressive. In Cochinchina's specific historical conditions, the Nguyen's policies of attraction to the Chinese achieved excellent results. This contributed a lot to build a stable government and to create a position and power for the secession and economic development in the southern region of Vietnam. And to a certain extent, it had a particular influence on the policy of the Nguyen Dynasty later for the Chinese.

### References

- [1] Phan Đại Doãn et al., *Một số vấn đề về Nho giáo Việt Nam* (Some Issues about Confucianism in Vietnam), National Political Publishing House, Hanoi, 1998.
- [2] Nguyễn Hiền Đức (1993), *Lịch sử Phật giáo Đàng Trong* (History of Buddhism in Cochinchina), Ho Chi Minh City Publishing House. Vol1, 1993.
- [3] Lê Quý Đôn, *Phủ biên Tạp lục* (Frontier Chronicles), Social Sciences Publishing House, Hanoi, 1964.
- [4] Trịnh Hoài Đức, *Gia Định Thành thông chí* (Unification Records of Gia Dinh), Vol. 4, Education Publishing House, Hanoi, 1998.
- [5] Trần Kinh Hòa, *Mấy điều nhận xét về Minh Hương xã ở Hội An* (Some Remarks on the Minh Huong Association in Hoi An), Vietnam Journal of Archeology, Issue 1, Saigon, 1960.
- [6] Pierre Poivre, *Hồi ký về xứ Cochinchina* (Memories of Cochinchina), Ho Chi Minh City Publishing House, 1998.
- [7] Thích Đại Sán, *Hải ngoại ký sự* (Overseas Memoir), Hue Universty, 1963.