

# Chinese inscriptions about the Chinese people in North Viet Nam

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**Abstract:** *Chinese inscriptions about the Chinese associated with the activities of the Chinese in the northern regions of Vietnam appeared mainly during the Le and Nguyen dynasties from the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century to the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Through the epitaphs at the Institute of Han Nom Studies and field results (during the years 2019-2020), the article summarizes the Chinese inscriptions about the Chinese people in the northern regions of Vietnam, as well as exploits typical documentaries in learning about the history of the Chinese community and their activities in Vietnam.*

**Keywords:** Chinese Inscriptions, Chinese Community, Huiguan, Han-written Materials, the Northern Vietnam

## 1. Documentary Chinese inscriptions about the Chinese people in North Viet Nam

Chinese inscriptions about the Chinese people are mainly found in two former commercial centers - Pho Hien and Thang Long-Ha Noi, and some other localities.

### 1.1. *Chinese inscriptions about the Chinese people in Pho Hien*

Pho Hien is the name of Hien Nam trading post, located in the capital of the Son Nam Region under the Le Trinh dynasties in the 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries, now in Hung Yen City, Hung Yen Province. Pho Hien was the gathering place of foreign merchant ships before moving to Thang Long, so it was also called Van Lai Trieu 來朝溝 (the dock to enter the imperial capital). However, when the trade between the West and Pho

Hien declined, most foreigners, including a part of the Chinese, moved elsewhere, mainly to Thang Long or to the South. But several Chinese traders still stayed here, almost monopolizing trading activities.

Nowadays, Pho Hien is an ancient town with many old architectures and inscriptions, including inscriptions about the Chinese people. These inscriptions mainly concentrate in some sites relating to the Chinese, such as Dong Do Quang Hoi in Pho Hien Road, Hong Chau Ward, Hung Yen City (2 inscriptions); Mau Temple in Bai Say Road, Quang Trung Ward (2 inscriptions); Thien Hau Temple in Trung Trac Road, Quang Trung Ward, built in 1640 by 14 Chinese families from Canton (Guangdong), Guangxi and Fujian to worship Madame Lam Tuc Mac

(5 inscriptions); and the worshipping house of the On family in Le Loi Ward (1 inscription). Most of these inscriptions directly or indirectly mention the Chinese people, such as describing the construction or restoration of the architecture with the participation and donation of the Chinese people; or religious activities of the Chinese community in Pho Hien and the surrounding areas. Particularly, in Pho Hien, there is an inscription directly relating to the Chinese community here in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It is the inscription found in the temple dedicated to a prime minister of the Le family, composed by Chen Ditao and inscribed in the fourth year of the Bao Thai reign (1723). Chen Ditao was the captain of the Hainan ship, a man from Jinjiang District, Quanzhou Prefecture, Fujian Province, China residing in Van Lai Trieu.

Besides, there are some inscriptions in other temples and pagodas built by local people, with contribution from Chinese residents, such as Co Tung Pagoda (2 steles), Chuong Pagoda (3 steles), and Xich Dang Pagoda (3 steles).

### **1.2. Chinese inscriptions about the Chinese people in Thang Long-Ha Noi**

In Ha Noi, there remain some Chinese architectural sites, namely the Fujian Assembly Hall, the Yuedong Assembly Hall, and the Quan Thanh Shrine.

The Fujian Assembly Hall was the meeting hall of Chinese people from Fujian Province, located at 40 Lan Ong Street (Hoan Kiem District), with 4 inscriptions. The Yuedong Assembly Hall belonged to Chinese people from Guangdong Province, situated at 20 Hang Buom Street (Hoan Kiem District), with 7 inscriptions. The Quan Thanh Shrine, at 40 Hang Buom Street (Hoan Kiem District) has 4 inscriptions. Besides, there

are some inscriptions at some other sites, such as Bach Ma Temple (2 inscriptions) and Dong Mon Pagoda restored by many Chinese people (1 inscription).

### **Inscription on Trùng tu Việt Đông hội quán (The Restoration of the Yuedong Assembly Hall), Ha Noi**



Source: Taken by the author in 2020.

The total number of inscriptions about the Chinese people collected at historical sites in the inner city of Ha Noi is 18 inscriptions at 5 sites. All these sites are located along two streets of Lan Ong and Hang Buom and the surrounding within Hoan Kiem District. This formerly was the quarter of Chinese merchants, running from the central part of the Old Quarter to the river port to the east of Thang Long in Ha Khau<sup>1</sup> Ward (present-day Hang Buom Ward).

### **1.3. Date of Chinese inscriptions about the Chinese people in Pho Hien and Thang Long-Ha Noi**

In terms of date, the earliest inscription about the Chinese people found in Thang

<sup>1</sup> Ha Khau was a river port formerly opened to To Lich and Nhi Ha Rivers.

Long-Ha Noi dated back to the eighth year of Chinh Hoa reign (1687) when the Chinese people in Thang Long took part in the restoration of Bach Ma Temple. The next were inscriptions found in assembly halls in Thang Long-Ha Noi, inscribed under the Nguyen Dynasty from the second year of Gia Long (1803) to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The earlier inscription, dated back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, was carved in Pho Hien, but the steles erected under the Nguyen Dynasty (19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> centuries) make up a large number.

The popular names used to date the inscriptions are the reigning names of Vietnamese kings from the Le Dynasty to the Nguyen Dynasty. Even when the author of the inscription was Chinese, he still used the reigning names of Vietnamese kings rather than those of Chinese emperors. For example, Chen Ditaio used the reigning name of a Le king (Viet Nam) “Bao Thai 保泰”; or the inscription in the ancestral worshipping house of the On family, composed by On Van Kham, used the reigning name “Bao Dai 保大 Giap Than” (1944). During the era of Kuomintang, some inscriptions erected in Pho Hien and Ha Noi this time used the name “Dan Quoc”, meaning the Republic of China (1912-1949).

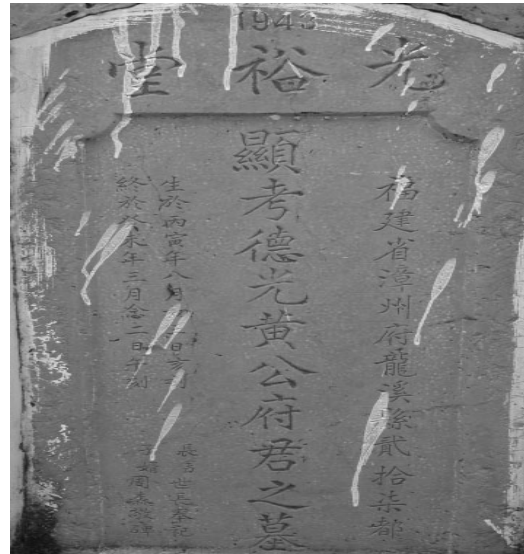
#### ***1.4. Chinese inscriptions about the Chinese people in other localities***

Through field surveys, we have found some Chinese inscriptions in other localities like Thanh Hoa and Cao Bang.

At No. 248 Tran Phu Road, Ba Dinh Ward, Thanh Hoa City, Thanh Hoa Province, there are now vestiges of a Fujian assembly hall. The hall is completely damaged and converted into the storehouse of the Thanh Hoa Publishing House, but there exist two stone steles with Chinese inscriptions.

The inscriptions, inscribed in the 24<sup>th</sup> year of Guangxu (1903) and the 25<sup>th</sup> year of Guangxu (1905), state that the hall was restored by the societies of Chinese people from Fujian, Canton, and Chaozhou.

#### **A Chinese epitaph (in Thai Binh)**



Source: Taken by the author in 2020.

In Viet Nam’s northern border province of Cao Bang, where a large number of Chinese settled in the past, there are two inscriptions at Bach Linh Shrine in Trung Khanh Town, Trung Khanh District, Cao Bang Province, inscribed in the year of Khai Dinh 啟定 Nham Tuat (1922), listing names of those who contributed to the shrine’s construction, including a Chinese man of the Peng family.

Apart from those sites, there are two graveyards of the Chinese people in Thai Binh Province and Ha Noi, where several Chinese-script epitaphs are found. Chinese people’s epitaphs in Thai Binh Province and Ha Noi reveals that Chinese people lived in Viet Nam during the 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> centuries and they came from Chinese provinces of Canton and Fujian.

Those Chinese-script epitaphs are vestiges of the Chinese residents who lived or had an attachment to these places.

## **2. Chinese community in Viet Nam through inscriptions**

The Chinese people migrated to Viet Nam quite early, especially under the Chinese domination before the 10<sup>th</sup> century. From the 10<sup>th</sup> century on, Viet Nam entered its period of independence and sovereignty, Chinese people's migration to Viet Nam was limited and tightly controlled. But there were still some waves of large-scale migrations, typically during the Song-Yuan war (late 13<sup>th</sup> century) and when the Ming was defeated by the Qing Dynasty in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century. Especially, during the beginning of the Qing Dynasty, people of the Ming Dynasty moved to Viet Nam in large numbers to avoid the new dynasty's threat.

This event was recorded in *Quốc sử triều Nguyễn* (The Nguyen dynasty National History) as follows: "In the spring (January) of the 31<sup>st</sup> year of Ky Mui (1679), former generals of the Ming Dynasty, Chief Commander of Longmen Yang Yandi and his Deputy Chen Anping brought over 3,000 soldiers and over 50 warships to the estuaries of Tu Dung and Da Nang, claiming to be courtiers of the Ming Dynasty who refused to be servants of the Qing Dynasty, so they came to submit themselves to (...). The troops and ships of Yandi and Huang Jian entered the Loi Lap estuary (later Gia Dinh) to My Tho (later Dinh Tuong), while Shangchuan and Anping entered the Can Gio estuary and garrisoned at Ban Lan (later Bien Hoa). They reclaimed wasteland and built streets, merchant vessels from the Qing Dynasty and Western countries, Japan, Java arrived,

the civilization gradually formed in the region of Dong Pho" (Nguyen Dynasty Bureau of National History, 1971, vol. 3: 285-286).

Together with those refugees were traders migrating to Viet Nam to do business in increasing quantities. Thus, the Le Trinh Court once issued a ban on northern traders to mix with the natives. For example, in the 25<sup>th</sup> year of Canh Hung (1764), an event was recorded as follows: "Formerly the Qing people who arrived to do business were only allowed to reside in Van Don, Van Ninh of Quang Yen and Can Hai (or Can Hai in Quỳnh Luu), Hoi Thong (a commune in Nghi Xuan) of Nghe An, not mixing with local people. By now, many people of Van Ninh have moved to other places, the Qing people took a chance to occupy the land. They opened many streets in Vinh Dai (a commune, La Son District), Ho Khau (a commune, Hung Nguyen District). The Court ordered the governors to escort them across the border. Old residents were gathered in separate areas" (Institute of History, 1998, book 33: 719).

In particular, to avoid the risk of insecurity for the imperial capital of Thang Long, the Le Trinh Court only permitted foreign trade vessels to come to Pho Hien. Therefore, Pho Hien in the 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries was a big trade port in North Viet Nam (Dang Ngoai). The book *Đại Nam nhất thống chí* (Comprehensive Encyclopedia of Dai Nam) notes: "Streets Bac Hoa Thuong and Ha were located to the southwest of Kim Dong District. Under the Le Dynasty, both Van Lai Trieu and Hien Nam Palace were here. These two streets, with tile-roofed houses like upside-down bowls, were the places where the Chinese people gathered to trade.

There was also Nam Hoa Street where the Chinese people lived, opposite to Bac Hoa Street” (Pham Dinh Ho, 2003: 61).

Studying inscriptions in Pho Hien, it is possible to see several Chinese names listed in steles of merit, especially in the steles of Thien Ung Pagoda, Kim Chung Pagoda, and some other temples and shrines. Accordingly, the inscriptions with Chinese names in the late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries are the steles engraved in the 23<sup>rd</sup> year of Chinh Hoa (1702) and engraved in the 7<sup>th</sup> year of Vinh Thinh (1711), found at Kim Chung Pagoda; the inscription carved in the 5<sup>th</sup> year of Vinh Thinh (1709), found at Thien Ung Pagoda; the inscription engraved in the 7<sup>th</sup> year of Vinh Thinh (1711), found at Hung Khanh Pagoda; the inscription at the shrine of a Prime Minister of the Le family, inscribed in the 4<sup>th</sup> year of Bao Thai (1723). According to those inscriptions, Chinese families who were present at Pho Hien during this period include the Guo 郭氏 (19 people), the Lin 林氏 (18 people), the Cai 蔡氏 (18), the Chen 陳氏 (10), the Xu 許氏 (9), the Hong 洪氏 (8), the Dai 戴氏 (4), the Huang 黃氏 (4), the Wei 魏氏 (4), the Ye 葉氏 (3), the Yao 姚氏 (3), the Li 李氏 (3), the Fu 傅氏 (3), the Wang 王氏 (3), the Yu 余氏 (2), the He 何氏 (2), the Gao 高氏 (1), the Yang 楊氏 (1), the Tian 田氏 (1), the Jiang 江氏 (1), the Kang 康氏 (1), the Guan 關氏 (1), the Lu 陸氏 (1), the Liang 梁氏 (1), the Mai 麥氏 (1), the Yan 顏氏 (1), the Fu 傅氏 (1), the Guan 關氏 (1), the Shi 史氏 (1), the Zeng 曾氏 (1), the Xi 洗氏 (1), the Shi 施氏 (1), and the Su 蘇氏 (1).

Later generations mingled with local communities, among which many descendants of Chinese people who had settled for a long time were allowed to

take Vietnamese villages/communes as their homeland and to participate in local government under the Restored Le Dynasty. For example, the inscription of the Temple of Martial Arts, titled “Kiến lập miếu từ/建立廟宇” (Construction of the Temple) inscribed in the 42<sup>nd</sup> year of Canh Hung (1781) listed contributors to the temple’s construction, including: “Great academician, Demi-minister, Earl of the Cinnamon Mountain **Lin Chunjue**, resident of Linh Duong Village, Thanh Tri District; Public Affairs Service Senior Translator **Cai Shisu**, resident of Thien Mac Commune, Nam Xuong District; Great Scholar, Public Affairs Service Senior Translator **Zeng Tinghui**, resident of Uoc Le Commune, Thanh Oai District; Public Affairs Service Senior Translator, District Assistant Chief of Canh Thuan **Su Bobing**, resident of Binh Vong Commune, Thuong Phuc District, Public Affairs Service Senior Translator **Hong Bisu**, resident of Hoa Duong Hamlet, Nhan Duc Commune, Kim Dong District...”.

We can see that the contributors from the Lin 林氏, the Cai 蔡氏, the Zeng 曾氏, the Su 蘇氏, the Hong 洪氏 were originally the Chinese people, but they were recognized as natives of Vietnamese villages or communes in Pho Hien and the surrounding area. This proves that the Chinese people in Pho Hien had quickly integrated with activities of the local communities, and received favours and special attention from the Restored Le government. They became local people and were even appointed officials.

Pham Dinh Ho (1768-1839), a well-known scholar under the Le Dynasty, wrote: My friend is Huang Xidu, a native from Xinhui, Yuedong, whose father arrived and did business in Pho Hien in the Son Nam

region, becoming a Southerner (*Đại Việt sử ký tục biên*, 1991).

*Đại Việt sử ký tục biên* (Unofficial Record of the History of Great Viet) - a history book under the Restored Le Dynasty, notes: "In the 6<sup>th</sup> year of Vinh Huu (1740), the donation of military equipment was launched. If a donator asked for a position, his title would be conferred according to his amount of equipment. Residents in the imperial capital and merchants at Lai Trieu (Pho Hien) in Son Nam who volunteered to donate to get a title would be allowed in line with the custom of paying rice. Those who did not want to be official would be repaid with cash. Whoever had such things and hid them, if discovered, it would be a crime" (Ngo Duc Tho, 1993: 3-9).

When Pho Hien was no longer a trading post in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, Chinese traders here spread out, a large part of them moved to Thang Long-Ha Noi where many Chinese people had settled and done business before. Under the Nguyen Dynasty starting from 1802, the imperial capital was moved from Thang Long to Thuan Hoa, but Thang Long-Ha Noi remained a big city and economic center in North Viet Nam. Doing business in Thang Long-Ha Noi, Chinese people became increasingly crowded and successful, so they raised funds, bought land and built the Yuedong and Fujian Assembly Halls, as well as repaired the Quan Thanh Shrine.

Since the construction of these two assembly halls and the reconstruction of the Quan Thanh Shrine in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century to the restoration of those sites under the reign of Minh Menh, it took around ten years. However, the number of Chinese donators and their money increased, as the inscription "Trùng tu Việt Đông hội quán"

(The Restoration of the Yuedong Assembly Hall) engraved in the 20<sup>th</sup> year of Minh Menh (1820) (code N.0187) listed 261 people and shops contributing 3,580 taels of silver, in which some donated a very large sum of money, for example, Zhou Chancai, Chen Xianzhou, Chen Zhiduan paid 160 taels each, 10 other people donated 150 taels each. In addition, Fan Handian and 16 people contributed 100 taels each.

Relating to the repair of Bach Ma Temple in the first year of Minh Menh (1820), the inscription "Trùng tu Bạch Mã miếu bi" (Stele on the Restoration of Bach Ma Temple, N. 0190) recorded names of people and shops in three streets of Chinese natives of Canton, Fujian and Chaozhou provinces who contributed to the repair. Accordingly, there are a total of 139 donators and shops, in which 107 shops of Cantonese residents, 20 Fujian shops, and 12 Chaozhou shops. The person who contributed at least 2 taels of silver, while the one who donated the most to 125 taels, totaling 2,173 taels of silver, among who were 6 Cantonese natives contributing 125 taels each, namely Zhou Yancai, Guan Xihuang, Liang Congyin, Changg Qihao, Pan Handian, and Zhou Yongji.

Thus, the Chinese people who settled in Thang Long-Ha Noi in the early years of the Nguyen Dynasty mainly came from Canton and Fujian. But after about ten years, apart from the Cantonese and Fujian Chinese, there appeared quite a few Chaozhou residents, as the inscription "Trùng tu Bạch Mã miếu bi" inscribed in 1820 (mentioned above) notes: "The shops in three streets of Cantonese, Fujian and Chaozhou residents donated as follows...". In addition, Chinese people from Hainan also settled here, but in a small number. Therefore, the

Chaozhou and Hainan Chinese people did not build their assembly halls but joined the Cantonese community.

Regarding religious practice, the Chinese people in Thang Long-Ha Noi mainly participated in two assembly halls, Yuedong and Fujian, along with Quan Thanh Shrine and Bach Ma Temple.

The Yuedong Assembly Hall was originally the Guanyu-worshipping hall of Cantonese Chinese. Later, the site was repaired with the participation of Chaozhou and Hainan Chinese who also engaged in religious activities here, so it also worshipped some other gods. The inscription “Trùng tu Việt Đông hội quán” (The Restoration of the Yuedong Assembly Hall, N. 198), carved in 1820, revealed that this site also worshipped the Divine Empress of Heaven (Tán Thuận Thiên Hậu nguyên quân), Three Great Emperor-Officials (Tam Nguyên Tam quan đại đế) and Fubo Great Marshal (Phục Ba Đại nguyên soái). The inscription explains more: “Holy Emperor Deity (Quan Thánh đại đế) for the sacred energy, the Divine Empress of Heaven for smooth waterway navigation, the Three Great Emperor-Officials for blessings and the Fubo General for his merits”.

Normally, the Fujian Hall worships the Divine Empress of Heaven, and the Cantonese Hall serves Guangdong. The inscription “Trùng kiến Hội quán Phúc Kiến” (The Restoration of Fujian Assembly Hall) in the 16<sup>th</sup> year of Gia Long (1817) writes: “The Empress of Heaven was conferred as the Grand Concubine of Heaven under the Yuan Dynasty, and granted with numerous titles of grace by different dynasties. Under the reign of Kangxi of the Qing, she was conferred the title of Divine Empress of Heaven (...) We the Min people (Minnan,

alias Fujian) reside near the coast, using vessels to transport goods abroad. Thanks to the Empress’s protection, the waves and sea are calm, very convenient for navigation. The whole world has been grateful to her for a long time. Therefore, it is impossible not to worship and pray her...”

However, the Divine Empress of Heaven is the goddess of river and water, the protector of marine navigation, so she is also worshipped at the Fujian and Cantonese Assembly Halls. The Chaozhou people worship the Fubo General (General Who Calms the Waves), thus the Cantonese Assembly Hall was also dedicated to the General when the Chaozhou Chinese joined. Because the Fubo General is worshipped here, some people mistakenly believe that Fubo is also worshipped at Bach Ma Temple.

Quan Thanh Shrine, also known as the Quan De Temple, worships Guanyu, a Three Kingdom-era figure famous for his loyalty, praised as the Holy Emperor Deity. The worship of Quan De became popular not only among the Chinese but also among local city-dwellers.

Documents of Chinese inscriptions in northern provinces indicate that, apart from Pho Hien and Ha Noi, most of provinces had Chinese guilds, for example in Thanh Hoa, the chief of three guilds, Guang (Guangzhao) Fu (Fujian) and Chao (Chaozhou) was Chen Zhaoying. In Nam Dinh, Thai Binh, Hai Phong, and Ninh Binh, there were also quite a few Chinese shops and guilds, such as Dong Phat, Ich Sinh (Nam Dinh), Xuong Loi (Thai Binh), Phuc Hung Long, Phuc Long, Bao Hien (Ninh Binh), Hoang Thanh Kim (Thanh Hoa)... listed in the inscription “Triều Châu phủ trùng tu” (The Restoration of Chaozhou

Palace) engraved at the Thien Hau Temple, Pho Hien, in the tenth year of the Republic of China (1921); or nobleman Peng listed in the inscription on the restoration of the Hundred God Shrine in Cao Bang,...

### Conclusion

In North Viet Nam, there is now only one Chinese assembly hall in Pho Hien (Dong Do Assembly Hall), two in Ha Noi (Fujian and Yuedong), and one vestige in Thanh Hoa (Fujian Assembly Hall). These sites all have inscriptions. In addition, there are Chinese-script inscriptions relating to the Chinese people at other Vietnamese places, such as temples, shrines, and pagodas. The earliest inscription found in Pho Hien dates back to 1625, and 1687 in Ha Noi. The rest are mainly inscribed under the Nguyen Dynasty from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The contents of these inscriptions reflect quite clearly, first of all, the trading port Pho Hien and Thang Long-Ha Noi, major economic and trading centers in North Viet Nam, as well as the organization and economic-religious activities of the Chinese people in the past. At the same time, these inscriptions also reflect specifically the policies and behaviors of the Vietnamese to the Chinese, facilitating the latter's settlement, thriving business, and contributions to economic development and religious activities in the region.

Though the Chinese inscriptions about the Chinese people found in Pho Hien, Ha Noi, and other northern localities are not abundant and concentrated like in Hoi An and Ho Chi Minh City, their contents are quite rich and documentary. The full collection and analysis of data of these

Chinese inscriptions will help deepen our understanding of their origin, occupation, economic life, and religious activities in North Viet Nam, where the Chinese people and culture have left quite deep imprints, as well as the Le and Nguyen dynasties' policies to the Chinese people in Viet Nam in general, and in the North, especially Pho Hien and Ha Noi in particular. This article has pointed out some of those aspects, boosting the deeper study of the Chinese people in Viet Nam, and contributing to the preservation and exploitation of the Sino-Nom heritage in current conditions.

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