

A BRIEF HISTORY OF CHINESE ORGANIZATIONS IN VIETNAM*

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One of the striking features of the Chinese living environment is the emergence and popularity of traditional social and professional organizations. Usually, the Chinese reside in groups of relatives, compatriots and co-workers. This forms the small Chinese villages and towns in Vietnam, such as “Pho Khach” (or *Guest Street*) in Hoi An in the 17th-18th century, “Minh Huong village” in Phien Tran (Gia Dinh) late in the 17th and early 18th centuries, “Thanh Ha village” in Thua Thien – Hue in the XVIII century... From these resident groups emerged social and professional organizations with the function of fostering social, economic and cultural relations within their community. These organizations include the Compatriot Society, a language-based organization usually called Bang; associations of people who belong to the same family; party groups or *Secret Societies*, Professional Societies and/or Chambers of Commerce.

The Compatriot Society or Shared-Language Society

This society, also called Bang, is one of the most common Chinese social organizations. This is an organization of people having the same homeland and speaking the same dialect. Bang is usually used as a prefix to the names of places that its members live in, like: the Fujian, Chaozhou, Xiafang, Hainan Counties. Some counties only liaise between those sharing

the same homeland and are relatives, such as Bang Nghe An – which connects people from Chaozhou; Suicheng county, for some people from Quang Dong; Sanzhang Society and Lizhou Society of people from Fujian.

In many cases, the Chinese Bangs were initiated through the setting up of temples. For instance, in the 17th century, immigrants from Fujian set up the Sanzhang Society, the Lizhou, and Compatriot Society during the reign of the Nguyen dynasty. The organizations were initially set up for religious purposes, setting up temples, shrines and places of worship in order to bring the Chinese people together. Gradually, the number of members increased, making up a large group before the establishment of Fujian Bang. Another example is the Lady Temple in District 5, Ho Chi Minh City today, which was set up by people from Tue Thanh and built in the 18th century. Members of Suicheng Bang met at this temple.

When they were first established, the Bangs were subject neither to the local law nor the Chinese law. The appearance of the Bangs and their development was closely linked to the growth of immigrants and their internal potential. According to some sources, the Chinese Bang in Vietnam was set up in 1787 in the South under the reign of the Nguyen Lord. At the time, only four Bangs were established. In 1814, under the Gia Long Emperor (1802-1819), these

* This article was issued in the *Anthropology Review*, No. 2 in 2002 in Vietnamese.

organizations were legalized and increased to seven: Guangdong Bang, Xiamen Bang, Chaozhou Bang, Hainan Bang, Qiongzhou Bang, Fuzhou Bang and Xiafang Bang.

In 1885, when the French started the regularization of the Chinese Bang and nationality, the number of Bang was reduced to five (Fuzhou and Xiamen merged into Fujian, Qiongzhou and Hai Nam merged into Hainan, and the remaining three Bangs of Quang Dong, Chaozhou and Xiafang stayed unchanged).

Under the Nguyen dynasty, Chinese under 60 years old with wealth could join the Bang. The Bang had to be set up under the principles of being compatriots with a shared language. Each Bang was allowed to elect a leader to look after its activities and represent the Bang in its interactions with local authorities. Usually, the head was usually someone with prestige and wealth within the Bang. Each Bang chief could serve for four years. Large Bangs were allowed to have two deputy chiefs, each representing a group with a particular dialect. Prior to 1825, the selection of the Bang by its members had to be ratified by the King. Later, the only requirement was that the local authority was informed of the selection (Dao Trinh Nhat, 1924, p. 2-3; Nguyen Van Huy, 1993, p. 351-352; Chau Hai, 1992, p. 60).

During the reign of the Nguyen dynasty, the Chinese Bang mainly assumed the social function of mitigating conflicts and supporting one another, but under the French, its responsibility was altered to include tax collection, and management of

resident books and immigrants. This extension of responsibilities made the Bang look more like a self-managed administrative unit. With the favorable legal and business environment created by the French since early 20th century, the Chinese Bang flourished, increasing its membership and diversifying its investment activities.¹ Since then, the Bang has emerged as a center for mitigating social conflicts, arranging and dividing business fields among members, and representing its members in relation with other Bangs and the local authorities, etc.

Due to the different living environment, the Chinese Bangs not only differ in language and number of members, but also in professions and, to some extent, cultural lifestyles and social status. The most crowded Bang was Guangdong. In the mid 20th century (1950), the Guangdong Bang had 337,500 members, accounting for 46.6%. The majority of the members of this Bang migrated from the Southern Coast of Guangdong province. They were outgoing, devoted but hot-tempered and impatient, not diligent like those from Chaozhou and Xiafang. The majority of Guangdong people were concentrated in the Cho Lon market area. They were good at making metal utensils, jewelry, repair of machines and machinery, carpentry, making footwear, tailoring and petty trading (*Chap pho*). The *Chap pho* profession in the Sai Gon – Cho Lon area prior to 1975 was under the monopoly of the Guangdong people. They controlled the fruit and drink shops in areas

¹ In 1907, the members of the Fujian Bang built the Fujian school. Three years later, (in 1910), Guangdong school of the Guangdong Bang was established. Schools of other Bangs followed suite.

populated with Chinese. The Guangdong people were also famous for rice pounding. The engineers good at repairing, assembling and managing these rice pounding facilities in Sai Gon – Cho Lon were Guangdong people. In agriculture, the Guangdong people were good at animal husbandry, especially of chickens, ducks and quails, etc.

The Chaozhou Bang stood second after Guangdong in terms of population (225,000 people, accounting for 31%). They came from the Northeast coast of Guangdong province and Southeast of Fujian province today. Their language was close to the Xiamen people of Fujian province. The Chaozhou' forte was trading in vegetables, fruits and tea. They were also engaged in seafood processing, trading in rice and herbal medicines, and making sugar. A large number of the Chaozhou members worked as porters at ports, laborers in rice pounding and other, food processing facilities, and the weaving industry. Like the Fujian people, the Chaozhou people had strong business connections with their compatriots in the region. They were also humble, hard working, and reasonable like the Fujian. Unlike other Bangs, a large number of those coming from Chaozhou resided in the Mekong Delta, especially the provinces of Can Tho, Soc Trang, Tra Vinh, Rach Gia and Bac Lieu.

Fujian Bang, although not having a large population with only 8% of the total Chinese population in Vietnam (60,000 people), occupied high economic positions. They were patient, decisive, and had strong solidarity among themselves. Among the Chinese population in Vietnam, the Fujian

Bang was famous for its solidarity, friendship and discipline. They seized a monopoly over trading in metals, machines, scrap metal and were strong traders. They were also tactful in their relations with other Bangs and local authorities.

The Xiafang Bang, accounting for about 10% (75,000 people) of the Chinese population in Vietnam, resided in Guangdong province, after they migrated from the North of China to the South of Vietnam. Later, they migrated to other Southeast Asian countries as well. Due to the struggle they had to wage for survival, the Xiafang people had the spirit of overcoming challenges and were patient. Like the Chaozhou, the Xiafang were good at traditional medicines and ranked first among the Vietnamese Chinese in this profession. Unlike the Chaozhou, the Xiafang people resided mainly in the Sai Gon – Cho Lon area. Apart from traditional medicines, they held high positions in the bread, leather, and weaving businesses.

The Hainan Bang accounted for only 3% (30,000 people) of the Chinese population in Vietnam. They were originally from Hainan islands and the Lizhou peninsula. Due to their small number and limited resources, they chose to specialize in the food business. They made western style food to compete with other big Bangs, especially the Guangdong Bang. They were good at providing services for food, beverage, entertainment and in hairdressing (Tsai Maw Kuey, 1968, p. 85; Nguyen Van Huy, 1993, 351-352; Dao Trinh Nhat, 1924, p. 2-3, 8-9).

Under market competition, the boundaries in profession, lifestyle and social status of the Bangs were gradually loosened. Thus professional societies among the Chinese appeared, accelerating the process of integration of the Bang ethnic groups. To promote this process, the Southern Chinese Bangs in the early 1920s set up the “Four Bang Association,” comprising the Guangdong, Chaozhou, Fujian, and Xiafang Bangs (Chau Hai, 1983, p. 133). In 1927, this association changed to become the “Chinese Vietnamese Society.” Since then, the Bangs in general, and the Chinese Vietnamese Society in particular started to receive the attention of the Chinese National Party Government. They criticized the French for using the Chinese as an administrative body, a self-ruled community with the purpose of dividing the Chinese community overseas. Under the pressure of the Vietnam Nationalist Party (Quoc Dan Dang), the French banned the Bang as an organization in 1947. The Trung Khanh treaty signed in 1948 between the French and the Chinese Nationalist Party government confirmed the abolishment of the autonomy enjoyed the five Chinese Bangs, and the practice of choosing their respective leaders. Instead, a new organization representing all Chinese was established, called “Association of Overseas Chinese Nationalist” (or Ai Lien). This partially political organization was born with warm welcome from the Chinese government; and it gradually became a monopolistic group of the Chinese in the Sai Gon – Cho Lon area and other cities in

Vietnam. To restrict the power of the group, the Sai Gon government banned the activity of this group in 1956. To sustain its influence in Vietnam, the Nationalist Party government in Taiwan encouraged the Bangs to resume their activity. The Nationalist Party government used the Bang as a mediator and middleman to propagandize Taiwanese policies toward the Chinese in Vietnam. The Bangs and their members received public support from the Taiwanese government in terms of finance, technology and human resources to develop education, healthcare, and business activities. To increase control over the Chinese, in 1960, the Ngo Dinh Diem government banned the Bangs’ activities. However, in reality, the Chinese Bangs continued to sustain themselves and were active until the South of Vietnam was fully liberated in 1975 (Chang Pao Min, 1982, p. 12; Unger, 1987-1988, p. 605; Tran Khanh, 1997, p. 280).

Each Bang contained **many families** and **kinship organizations** based on blood relations. In some cases, the organizations of relatives accepted those not from the same blood line, but with whom they were close and who were willing to accept the relationship within the particular clan. The lineage or kin group is a traditional social organization originating from China a long time ago. This organization, in a narrow sense, was called *gia toc* (lineage). This organization’s predecessor was the association of those who were related by blood and born in the same place. The creation of a large diaspora resulted in an

increase in the number of members, gradually becoming a large family with many branches of smaller families in an open system.

In the past, *gia toc* (*lineage*) was based on blood relations, and in the process of expanding its social boundaries, this organization developed into an association of relatives, *than toc* (*kin group*) consisting of those who were closely related (same family name) and those from the mother's family (different family names).² Such reforms allowed the association of those sharing a family name or lineage to increase in number and enhance their social status. Compared with the Bang, the family-based organizations were more isolated, closed, and class-based with clear divisions in the system and branches of each *than toc*. Each branch had its own shrines, assets, and worshipping rituals, following strictly the heritage and rules recorded in the *family annals*. The worship of ancestors is an important contribution to preserving customs, traditions, and traditional lifestyles of the Chinese while creating the feeling of blurring class divisions. Chinese Vietnamese in the past and today use the family worship house not only for worshipping the ancestors, but also as a meeting point to discuss business. In the past, the marriages of children were conducted in the shrines. There, the newly-wed couple would be congratulated and presented with gifts and/or money by the head of the family.

² According to tradition, in China, brothers of the *four great generations* are closed brothers. If any one's father dies, the others have to be in mourning. Relatives from the fifth rank are considered distant.

The conduct of weddings in the shrines was not just a formal function, but also had the aim of checking on the behavior and faithfulness of the new generation and educating them in the traditions carried down from the ancestors.

The blood relations of the Chinese and those in the family play an important role in the preservation and development of Chinese cultural identity among the Chinese. Chinese Vietnamese in the past and today not only maintain their contact with their homeland by sending money to family members, investing in the Chinese economy, and exchanging goods and commodities, but in sustaining their culture. In the past, the Chinese Vietnamese usually wished to have their remains sent back to China and be buried in their families' cemetery.

They tried to China the sons born out of mixed marriages with local people, so that they could perceive directly the Chinese culture in their fatherland. The sons were taught by close relatives of the Chinese Vietnamese. Daughters born of mixed marriages were usually married to children of new immigrants from China. Thus, the new generation would have three-fourth Chinese blood, and their offspring would be mostly Chinese as well. Clearly, the family and clan factor not only contributed to preserving traditional cultural values, but also to maintaining their bloodline in a strange land.

The Chinese family/clan organization has for long been the means to preserve traditional cultural values, support trade and

communication with the outside world. By tradition, the assets of this organization were not only used for rituals and ancestor worship, but also for education and supporting their members in contests and exams for social status... The combination of social-cultural and social-political functions made the organization more attractive to its members, and this party contributed to removing the boundaries of class, creating the illusion of “all are brothers.”

Together with the development of economic and professional relations, and the family/clan based associations, the Bangs of fellow-countrymen are sometimes intertwined. In many cases, these two are merged into one. Usually, in an organization based on blood relations, relatives and fellow countrymen, there is a board of management chosen by its members called Lishihui. A Lishihui can have from three to five members including one head and two deputies (Chau Hai, 1992, p. 70). This type of organization has appeared in Vietnam since the 17th century with the establishment of the Sanzhang Association, Lizhou Association, and Compatriot Association by the Fujian people, etc.

During the reign of the French colonialists, and especially under the Saigon regime, the Chinese family/clan organizations flourished. The family/clan organizations were economically strong, like the Chen, Guo, Mai, Lin, Liu, Wang and Cheng, and were well known among the Chinese. Since the 1950s and 60s, when the Sai Gon regime of the Ngo Dinh Diem

government banned the activities of the Chinese Bangs, the fellow-countrymen organizations, and their kin group (*than toc*) based organizations, became stronger; in fact, the fellow-country men and the *than toc* organizations were intertwined.

In short, together with the Bang, the organization of those sharing the same family name, clan was set up by the Chinese not only to maintain and transfer its Chinese traditional cultural values from generation to generation, but also as a means to preserve and develop material wealth, and protect their lives in a strange land.

One of the Chinese special traditional social organizations is the *Secret Society*. This organization was set up in the 18th century in China in order to fight against the Yuanmeng domination (1279-1368). Since the second half of the 17th century, this form of organization became popular all over China, especially in Huanan, to fight against the Manqin dynasty (1644-1912). In the North of China, the Secret Society is called “Chiao” – a form of a criminal organization; in South of Huanan, it is called “*Hui*” (meaning group, association). One of the groups that was famous for its activities in South China and among the Chinese overseas and Southeast Asian Chinese was “San-Bo Hui” or “San – Tiandihui” (Heaven and Earth Society) or “Hongmeng” (Guangfuhui, Xingzhonghui). According to legend, the Triad Gang was set up at a Buddhist temple near Fuzhou, in Fujian province in 1674. There, its members held an initiation ceremony where members swore on blood to

live and die for the group. Their slogan then was “to annihilate the Ch’ing dynasty, recover the Ming dynasty” (Fairbank et al., 1965, p. 119-120). Since the mid 19th century until the first half of the 20th century, the Secret Society were very active in the countryside as well as the coastal areas of Southeast China. Poor peasants, members of classless street-gangs, petty traders, and low-level staff of the royal families comprised most of the members of these organizations, although there were some rich peasants as well. Besides, there were also representatives from the feudal intellectuals, and those who had failed the exams for high positions. Although the Secret Society group's members always vowed to be faithful to the teachings of Confucianism (to be generous, tolerant, not lie, treat, and commit crime), in reality, its activities were akin to that of the pirates (Secret Society in China in the past, 1970, p. 38, 59).

In order to avoid the oppression of the Manqin regime, many of the Secret Society's members fled abroad to many countries, including Vietnam. Once abroad, they merged into the local Chinese community and recruited new members and set up new branches. However, in the living environment abroad, the social-class mechanisms of the group experienced many changes. Unlike in China, it was the urban poor that provided social support for the Secret Society. Its mission was not only to fight against the Manqin family, but in many cases, it became the protector for a group of Chinese (especially rich businessmen)

against oppression and suppression from outside. The main method of protection was killing. The profits from the trading business of the elite Chinese provided the main source of funding for the Secret Society (Chinese Ethnic groups in Southeast Asia, 1986, p. 25). When discussing the causes that led to the emergence and development of Secret Society abroad, many scholars suggest that lonesome male migrants without brothers and relatives abroad forced these Chinese to join the organization (Lainger, 1985, p. 35).

The traces of Secret Society can be found in Vietnam late in the 17th century and early 18th century, when thousands of Chinese migrated to Vietnam. The Nguyen historical record notes that in 1749, a Chinese trader from Fujian named Liwenquan secretly shipped weapons to Dong Pho street. He gathered a group of 300 fellow countrymen to stand up against the local authority. This act of insurgency was discovered and the Vietnam government arrested 57 people which included Liwenquan (Dai Nam Thuc Luc Tien Bien, 1962, p. 209-210).

One of the strongest Secret Society in Vietnam during the French occupation was “Tiandihui.” Its branches were mainly in provincial towns along the Vietnam-China border, and in big cities like Sai Gon – Cho Lon, and Hai Phong. Under the colonial regime, and the steadfast growth of the Chinese traders, social and political stratification occurred within the Secret Society. Some joined the remaining troops

of “Taiping Tianguo” present in Vietnam then, which tended to be anti-colonial and anti-feudal. A manifestation of this tendency was the uprising led by the branch of the Tiandihui in Quang Ninh to destroy the Mong Cai Fort in 1886; and another was the movement to destroy a major defense position in Sai Gon big detention center in order to rescue leader Phan Xich Long in 1916.³ In general, the Tiandihui and other Chinese Secret Societies gradually lost their initial political character (anti-feudal, especially after the 1911 Xin Hui revolution when the feudal military regime of Man Thanh was overturned) and became a tool to protect the interests of the rich Chinese. Since then, the Chinese traders and businessmen controlled the Secret Society; its members included people from all walks of life, from the bandit, to the priest and the rich (Simonhia, 1959, p. 140).

It should be noted that, since early 20th century, when the movement against the colonial and feudal forces strengthened, many Vietnamese joined the Chinese Secret Society. In Sai Gon – Gia Dinh, Cho Lon, Bien Hoa, Ben Tre and

Chau Doc, where the anti-French movement was strong, membership of the Tiandihui at that time increased to the thousands. At the same time, the French accelerated its suppression of gangs, including the Secret Society (Nguyen Van Quang, 1997, p. 92-94). Many cells of the Tiandihui were disbanded. Under the Sai Gon regime (1955-1975), the Chinese traditional organizations, including the Secret Society, were banned. However, in reality, Secret Society was sustained and kept its activities hidden under the guise of other social political organizations. Many of the Tiandihui's members were recruited to be guards, collecting information for the big Chinese trading companies. Another group was pulled by the imperial and colonial forces to stand against the government of Vietnam. Many of its members returned to their old lives as homeless vagrants, setting up new gangs and engaging in criminal activities.⁴

In general, the activity of Secret Society like the Tiandihui in Vietnam was not as strong as their counterparts in other Southeast Asian countries. This was because the organization was banned or under close control and supervision of the State. Further,

³ Phan Xich Long (Hong Long) is a Chinese in Cho Lon, and leader of a gang under Tiandihui, or “Heaven and Earth society.” In 1913, Phan Xich Long claimed to be a descendant of Ham Nghi and attempted to become the Emperor of Vietnam in order to stand against the French along with some members. They created explosive, spread propaganda fliers all over Sai Gon - Cho Lon, calling for people to rise up. The movement collapsed, Phan Xich Long was arrested and detained at the Cho Lon detention center. In March 1916, Tiandihui attempted to destroy the detention center and rescue Phan Xich Long, but failed. The French arrested 56 “heroes,” shot and buried them in the same grave.

⁴ Since the 30s, and early 50s, in the South, especially in Sai Gon – Cho Lon area, appeared a group selling weapons of those Western gangs, conducting activity like the secret society groups called Binh Xuyen Group. Most members of this group were Vietnamese, but many were Chinese who once members of the Tiandihui. The French supported this group of Vietnamese as counter to other patriot groups fighting against the colonist then (mainly the Viet Minh). Members of Binh Xuyen increased rapidly in the 40s and early 50s. However, when the Ngo Dinh Diem came to power, this group was disbanded.

in the circumstances of Vietnam being a colony and the revolution in China, this organization was profoundly stratified, gradually losing its initial purpose, and becoming a tool for the protection of the elite Chinese and other political forces. After the liberation of South Vietnam, the Chinese Bangs and secret groups were disbanded. However, what forms they changed into needs further study.

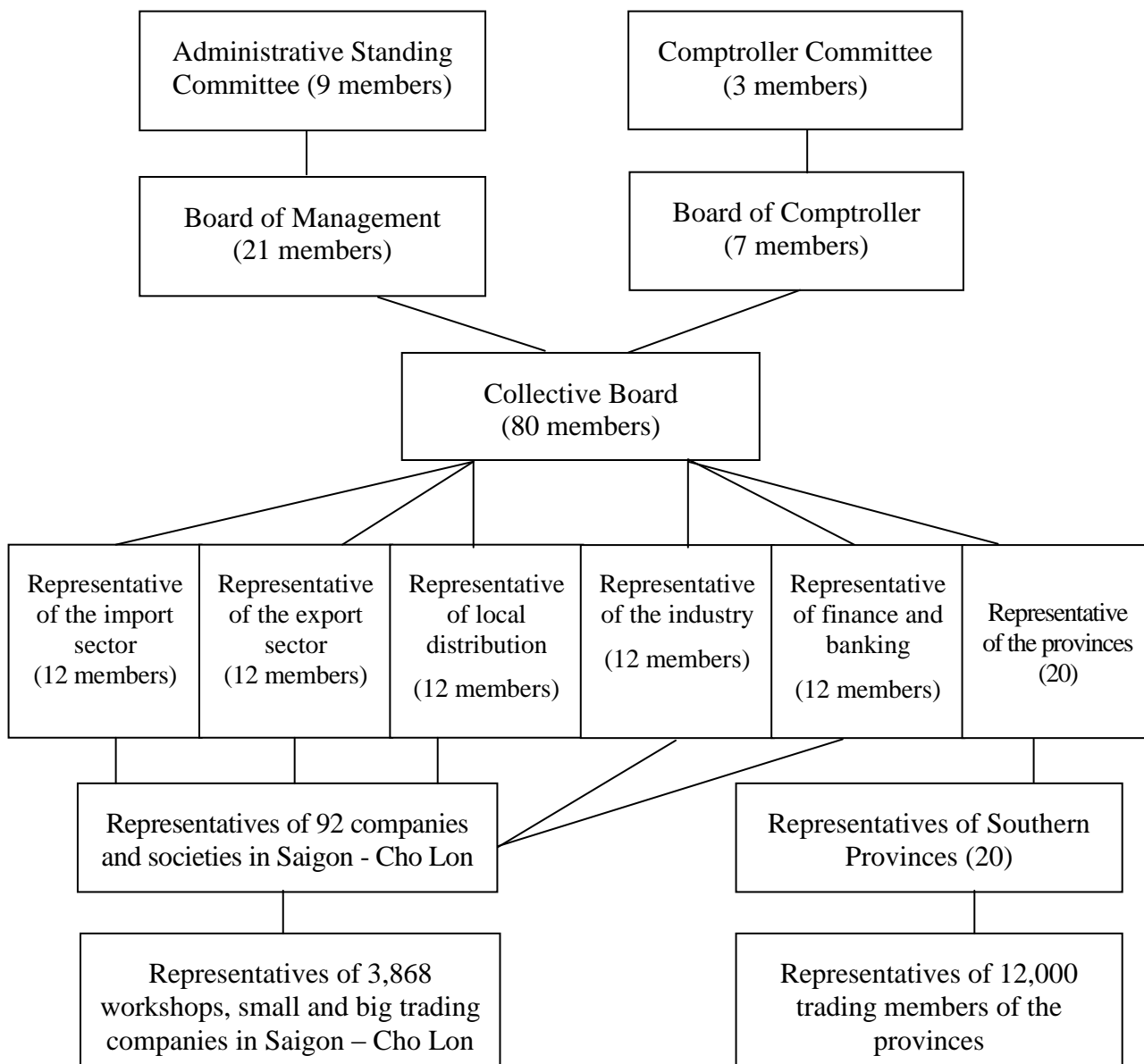
Apart from the traditional social organizations as mentioned above, the Chinese also set up many groups that were profession-based, like the tailors' association, barbers' association, weavers' association, Chinese medicine association, bankers' association, and the transportation association. There was also the workers' association set up to protect the rights of workers⁵ (See Tsai Maw Kuey, 1968, p. 131). One of the typical forms of the professional organization was the traders' associations, the outstanding among these being the Cho Lon Chamber of Commerce. The Chinese traders' associations were usually the outcome of the coming together of three to five relatives trading in the same goods and/or services. This group gradually extended to include those was not relatives, leading to the formation of associations like the banking-finance association, the hotel

association, and the restaurants' association and so on. These associations had many branches and members in different localities with an agreed set of rules. The get-together of people sharing business activities accelerated the accumulation process, specialization in profession and products, and strengthened their competitiveness.

From the groups based on fellow-countrymen family, trading associations, and specialized trading associations, emerged the Chinese General Trading Association and finally, the Chinese Chamber of Commerce. The Chinese General Trading Association in Vietnam was officially established in 1903 and legalized (recognized and accepted by the French regime) in 1904 and was chaired by Mr. Trieu Tieu Minh. The predecessor of this organization was The Southern Chinese General Trading Association established in 1900. In 1910, the association went through reforms to assign specific functions and roles such as the department of license tax, the department supplying import permits, and the department for leasing space in the market, and so on. It thus became the Chinese Vietnamese Trading Society. In 1912, the organization had five functional bodies with specialized tasks: exports; imports; domestic trading; insurance and banking; and industry. In 1924, the Cho Lon Chinese Trading Group had a complete functional organizational chart (See Tsai Maw Kuey, 1968, p. 130-131; Nguyen Van Huy, p. 364-366; Chau Hai, 1992, p. 73-74) (see Chart 1).

⁵ Worker professional association is a social public organization, established in support of the rights of workers. The Chinese Worker's Federation was set up in 1924 consisting of 20 members. Besides, there were many other independent Unions. The Federation set up a school named Trung Chanh Worker School. In 1955, the Federation of Chinese workers had 14 branches and 17 independent unions. These unions were set up according to profession, fields of activity.

Chart 1: The Chinese Chamber of Commerce in Cho Lon prior 1975 Organizational Chart



Source: Tsai Maw Kuey (1968, p. 129).

Thus, from a group of three to five members based on relations or trading in similar goods, the Chinese set up their own strong business system. This system was like a pyramid, with the Chinese Vietnamese Cho Lon Chamber of Commerce (since the 50s called the Chinese Cho Lon Chamber of Commerce) at the top. From the top it extended down into many branches in an open

yet orderly system comprising petty traders, retailers, spare-parts makers, manual workshops, factories, trading companies, and large import-export companies. This allowed for efficient production, greater and quicker profits and faster capital circulation.

While the class factor and economic conflicts were not apparent among the Bangs, family groups and, to some extent, the Secret

Society because of the traditional social relations, the business and professional organizations in general and the chamber of commerce in particular were clearly delineated by profession and class factors. These organizations formed a network of business interests facilitating the development of Chinese businesses and traders. However, it should also be noted that the leaders of the Chambers of Commerce were typically rich people with prestige in the extended Chinese community, and usually managed the Bangs and family/clan based organizations. Thus some social functions were also included in the activities of the Chambers of Commerce, including the funding of schools and hospitals, humanitarian insurance, and protection of other legal rights of Chinese. The combination of social and economic functions turned the Cho Lon Chinese Chamber of Commerce into the center that mediated all activities of the Chinese. Clearly, this combination allowed the rich Chinese to expand their influence outside and inside the Chinese community, creating forces to build community solidarity, and partly created the illusion of a united Chinese family.

To sum up, Chinese organizations such as the Bang, the Family/Clan based organizations, Secret Society, and business associations are traditional and social organizations with some class factors. Their roles have changed with time, from providing material and emotional support and managing social relations to ensuring control of the elites. They have also played an important role in sustaining the customs,

traditions and Chinese spiritual lifestyles among the Chinese diaspora. This was clearly manifested in the care of Bang and Dong Ho in preserving ancestral worship rituals, funerals, weddings, and maintaining Confucian order and virtue. Clearly, these organizations had the capacity to unite the people and maintain Chinese culture, and to an extent, intervene in the process of integrating into the Vietnamese society. The combination of economic and social functions of the Chinese economic professional organizations allowed businessmen and elites to strengthen their economic position, and at the same time, spread their political stances and ideology among the Chinese in general.

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Preparation of cultivated land of the Muong in Thanh Hoa province.

Photo: Nguyen Ngoc Thanh