

Identity Changes of the Chinese Community in Vietnam: A Survey of 20 Families in Cholon*

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When on April 30th 1975, the North-Vietnamese troops invested Saigon, the Hoa of Cholon, the “Chinese district” of the town, now Ho Chi Minh city, had been dwelling in the region since its colonisation by the Nguyễn in the XVIIth century. Numerous and powerful, they had gradually become a major political, economical and cultural actor of the Southern capital. In the years that followed the “Liberation”, the political choices of the new power and the worsening of the relationship between Vietnam and China provoked the exodus of a large part of this population. Those who remained underwent the re-orientation of the society and had to adapt their daily life to this new situation.

This paper is part of a wider survey of the Chinese community of Cholon, completed for our PhD thesis. The study concerned the demographic and identity changes that have affected the social and daily life of about 20 Chinese families living in the 11th ward of the 5th district of Ho Chi Minh City. After 1975 and 1978, they decided to stay in Vietnam when most of their neighbours fled the country. For this research we focused on the integration process in the host society and the social and cultural evolution of these families, considering the historical heritage in which their

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ethnic group is rooted. The specificity of the Vietnamese society was also considered. Our aim was to understand the long-term development of the ward as well as the survival and adaptation strategy of its inhabitants to the changes that took place after the fall of Saigon in 1975 and the subsequent installation of the communist government. The future prospects of this restricted group, in the light of the current local and international context, was also in mind. For this research, official documents as well as working papers, public records, magazines etc. were used, but the main source of information came from four consecutive one month field investigations realised between 1996 and 2000. Using witnesses' accounts of their own life, most interviews being conducted in Mandarin Chinese, few in English, we tried to obtain an insight view of these families in order to reconstitute their social paths, some of them already living in Vietnam for three, four and up to five generations. Vietnamese inhabitants of the ward have also been regularly solicited.

Our initial proposition was that although today, on different aspects, the economic situation seems to be bright for the Chinese of Cholon, in fact, a large part of the group still suffer and encounter difficulties to get adapted to the actual situation. The first assumption was that the breakdown of their society and the loss of face resulting from the inversion of social position have produced a group trauma that still exists.

Indeed, after the new government started to apply the political program it had been fighting for, like everyone in Southern Vietnam, the Chinese of Cholon were dispossessed of their properties and wealth. But, as ethnic Chinese, they also lost all the privileges that their communities had acquired through the years, to become losers among the losers, social outcasts who switched from being an economically dominant society which felt culturally superior, to a dominated one. The interviews collected during our investigation show that the group is still deeply affected by this issue. If, at the daily life level, this inversion of position has been accepted "par la force des choses", intellectually the situation is very different. In fact most group members estimate that the Hoa are, somehow, co-owners of the place

because their ancestors were pioneers who fought with the Vietnamese forces to conquest this territory from the Khmers. Lately they defended it against the French, paid a heavy toll during the Tâ-son revolt, sweat blood to clear the land and largely contributed to the cultural, intellectual and economical enrichment of the region. Finally, the fact that Vietnamese and Chinese are cousins who share a cognate language and a common cultural background, added to the fact that Vietnam is an ancient tributary country which has been, for long, part of the Chinese world, make them feel at home. This last reason also drives them to consider that, according to the Confucian logic they should be treated and respected as elder brothers and should “naturally” play a dominant role in the society. For all these reasons the loss of face that the community suffered after 75 was extremely difficult to accept. To regain a satisfactory image in its own eyes, the group seems to have re-interpreted the past in order to create a satisfactory explanation of the facts, using the post-colonial logic that imputes the evils of the colonised societies to the colonial masters. In this reconstruction, the social and political organisation imposed by the French, including the fact of having to abandon the traditional Chinese education, would have deeply disturbed the Vietnamese society, provoking a loss of the values that previously governed it harmoniously. Re-considering history under that point of view no longer places the Vietnamese in the position of being winners imposing changes to the Hoa society, but emphasises the fact that, being defeated, they lost their original virtues. This situation would then explain the subsequent drifts, excesses and political lack of balance of the Vietnamese society in the past as well as the economic and social problems Vietnam still suffers today.¹ On the contrary, the Hoa never abandoned their handwriting and traditions and consider themselves as the heirs and guardians of this priceless heritage. Having preserved this legacy would explain the cultural superiority, the efficiency of their organisation as well as the economic success that the Chinese society managed to maintain until 1975.

¹ For a detailed analysis of this process, please see our thesis to be edited, chapter II, “A destabilised society”.



A shop specialised in Chinese traditional medicine articles, Cholon (Photography M. Dolinski 2000)

Another recurrent point that appears in the speech structure of most interviews and life histories, is a striking opposition between past and present.² In this pattern, the term “*jiefang* (Liberation)” is used as a permanent marker drawing the line of a dramatic rupture, where “before” represents a kind of mythical golden age and “now” an economically problematic present. This Taxi-Om (Moto taxi driver) evoking this past is a common example of this process.³

Before the “Liberation” the city was different. In this mainly Chinese, some families already living here for generations. This place had a very busy commercial life. It was the good old time when the

² Of course, the specific nature of our quest induced a temporal axis which separates past and present, but, on the long run, during our formal or informal interviews, we realised that a persistent opposition between “before” and “now” also existed in the customary conversation. We might have over focused on it but decided to consider this speech structure as relevant as it conveyed some significant information.

³ Our interview 24A07072000, Hoa, Taxi-om, 60 years old.

foreign soldiers used to come here to spend their money. We really started to make money when the French came back. With the Americans our economic situation got even better and life became easier. You could make a lot of money and when one person was working it was enough to feed a whole family. If you had many kids it wasn't a problem. I mean that, when the Americans were here, if you were working for them, you could feed four and up to five persons. Then it was the "Liberation" and we lost everything. Before we had a strong currency, now we are poor and our economy is weak. My wife and I don't even earn enough money to make a living with our two kids.

Many witnesses also insist on the dramatic changes that affected the relationship between Vietnamese and Chinese after 78. Before that date, say the Chinese inhabitants, in the ward, both ethnic groups were living in harmony; their relationship were simple and smooth, polite, even aiding.⁴ This peaceful neighbourhood relation slowly changed between 75 and 78, when the cohabitation became strained and more difficult. The Chinese who, before, would feel accepted and respected, some even say admired, felt rejected and humiliated. It seems clear that in the late seventies, the political choice and ideological considerations of the new government who launched several defaming campaigns against the Hoa, influenced the perception of the Vietnamese population and exacerbated the underlying tensions or frustrations toward the rich Chinese group. Today, in the streets where our survey took place, even if the social relations between the original Vietnamese inhabitants of the ward and the Chinese community are apparently good, we can still feel some tension. Now the number of ex North Vietnamese soldiers and civil working for the government as well as the North and South Vietnamese families who moved in the numerous confiscated or abandoned houses, have contributed to modify the ethnic

⁴ Interestingly this opinion seems to be partly shared by former Vietnamese inhabitants of Cholon or Saïgon interviewed on this question. Altogether they are described as good in spite of the problem of the Chinese economic domination.

ratio of the ward's population⁵ exacerbating the feeling of dilution. Inside the group, things have also changed. For ideological reasons many Chinese secretly fought with the Vietcong forces during the war (Anonymous 1969).⁶ After the victory they naturally worked for the new government. Others took the opportunity to gain some power and started to collaborate against their peers, being for example in charge of determining their neighbour's wealth or to identify the Vietnamese or their Chinese fellows previously engaged as officers in the South Vietnamese army or working for the American's special services. They would then send them to the camps. M. Chen a 70 years old Cantonese shop owner describes this period.

After 1975, when the communists arrived, we lived in dreadful conditions for five years. Most of the time we were anxious because when someone was rich, had been rich, or was simply suspected to be rich, they could come anytime and arrest him. Life was simply unendurable because we were not considered as patriots but as traitors. This is why we all wanted to leave this country. During this period, everyone was suspicious. Anyone could be a policemen or working for the police. The worst part of it is that, within the Chinese community, people would also distrust each other. It was almost as if we were divided in two parts. Amongst us you had bad Chinese, communists, traitors who betrayed their own blood.

Today, the relationship between neighbours are much clearer as everybody knows who is who, who is working for the police. "We call this guy James Bond 007, the international spy". The person is pointed out with humour and disdain, as everybody knows that he actively contributes to the close surveillance of the ward. This obliged relationship is integrated to

⁵ According to Laurent Gédéon (2002), between 1979 and 1989, the Chinese population in the 5th district, the traditional and most populated centre of Cholon, decreased of 13%. From an average of 52,7% ethnic Chinese in 1979, they were only 39,2% in 1989. Officially, according to Hồ Chí Minh, Cuc thong kê, in 2000, the Chinese population of Hồ Chí Minh-City was of approximately 620 000 persons representing 12 à 13% of the whole population of the city (Hồ Chí Minh City. 2001: 279).

⁶ In our interviews, this point has also often been raised.

every day's life and even if we can still feel some resentment, this fate seems to be accepted with realism.

If the basic frame opposing past and present appears in most interviews, we can clearly distinguish two different attitudes which are strongly related to the socio-cultural status of the families. Not surprisingly, those who generally better admit nowadays' situation are those who economically or socially have managed to find a new place in the society, sometimes using the "dark period" to grow rich or richer. In this group, we find successful shop owners or people running a small business. Some of them work for the government, sometimes being high ranked in the administration. Most of them are descendants of families settled in Vietnam for two, three or four generations and enjoy the fruits of their work. They can be considered as belonging to a kind of middle class having developed its own specificity related to the local history and society. As in other Asian countries (Koo 2003), the wealthier are very eager to appropriate traditional high-class cultural forms and use them as their status markers. Learning English in an American school or taking piano lessons are just common examples of this attitude. They project a positive future for themselves and their children and don't appear to be afraid of intermarrying with Vietnamese or seeing the group dissolved in the society. Indeed, their status allows them to mingle without fear of forgetting their roots as they can preserve their culture which is clearly presented, not only as a part of their identity, but also as a useful social investment. Therefore they find some advantages in this bicultural condition that serves them. Because of their situation, most of them have opportunities to travel abroad and they don't consider immigration as a necessity for themselves or their descent. Their children, even if they are very sensitive to the discrimination existing between Vietnamese and Hoa in the society, also feel at home in Vietnam. Opposite to that, are those who hardly accept the current situation and express regret not to have left the country. They represent a substantial proportion of our witnesses. They can be either small unsuccessful shopkeepers or, workers, peddlers, etc.. Most of

the time they have a low or very low educational level (Heberer 1999: 15)⁷ and feel frustrated as their economic situation is precarious. Most of the time, they associate this condition to the 1975's upheaval. Their speech usually shows the strongest opposition between past and present. They find a shelter in the traditional values and from this position condemn the social or economic problems of the Vietnamese society. This defensive attitude gives them the illusion of keeping a symbolic advantage and overcoming their own social relegation or difficulties. They often consider a "soft migration" as a solution to their problems. Even if "abroad" is an unknown and dangerous world, it is also idealised as "the place" where all the dreams of success are possible. Their relatives⁸ living in the U.S.A, France, Canada or Australia, are insistently solicited to help them, or at least their children, to leave the country through emigration programs or arranged marriages. Unfortunately their parents, if they often financially support those who were left back or decided to stay in Vietnam, seem to be increasingly reluctant to help them to migrate. They know, because they experienced the process, how difficult it is to get adapted to the Western, individual-centred culture, as well as the swift and strenuous pace of the working market. Where themselves suffered but succeeded, because there was no way back for them, they know that a newcomer, especially an adult, might find it extremely hard to live an integration process. They also consider that the situation is different for the younger generation who can easily get accustomed to a new surrounding. In fact, if the relatives don't encourage the elders to emigrate, they more favourably help the youngest ones to do so, through arranged marriages for example.⁹ These unions are generally matched by family members, friends or ex neighbours. This young girl who just got married to

⁷ Thomas Heberer underlines the fact that, not only in Vietnam, but in almost any developing country, one of the only economic alternative for people having a low educational background consist of this kind of self employment.

⁸ In 1987, 55% of the 74 957 families of Chinese origin living in Saigon had relatives living in about 20 foreign countries. In the 5th district they where about 65 % of them (Gédéon 2002: 66).

⁹ During our study we only met this case twice. In both cases, the groom met Chinese American girls.

a Chinese Canadian is an example of this situation:

Before the wedding I didn't really know who my future husband was, but we had often communicated by letter. My parents are both Chinese and they decided about my marriage when I was 18 years old. My father got in touch with some friends living in Toronto, Canada. In fact they were ex neighbours and he was in touch with them as they regularly wanted to know about the evolution of the situation here. By respect for my parents, I took the decision to accept to marry the person that my father would present me. I also knew that I was free to refuse as my father, clearly and I think honestly, told me that I had the choice to do so. In fact, my husband and I immediately got along quite well and it continues. He left the country when he was a kid baby and has a good job in Toronto now. But he says that over there it was difficult for him to find a girl friend he could trust. So when his parents told him about me, he decided to try his chance, as he knew that the Chinese girls here are very honest and work hard. We first wrote letters to each other, then we sent some videos and he gave me some telephone calls. Finally he came here with his parents so that we could meet and discuss more seriously about our possible future. We are married now and I am happy. I am waiting for my papers to emigrate and I take some English lessons in a private school here in Cholon.

Another frequent way to escape is to marry a Taiwanese. In the context of our survey, among the 20 families that have regularly been interviewed, almost all of them had one or two daughters being married to a foreigner of Chinese origin, generally a Taiwanese (Michel Dolinski 2000), when only two boys among these families had left the country that way.¹⁰ Ms Zhuang 70 years old, a Cantonese retired person who still own a small shop with her husband, was just coming back from Taiwan when we paid her a visit.

I have got five daughters and two sons. Three of my daughters are

¹⁰ For more details, see our Ph.D. thesis.

married to Taiwanese people. The elder, a boy, is married to a Vietnamese girl and my youngest one hasn't found a husband yet. My first daughter got married to a businessman who came to Cholon to work when the Taiwanese just started to come back here. He says that he immediately felt in love with her. In fact, first she didn't want him as we, the Chinese, know that the Taiwanese who come here are often already married in Taiwan, they lie to the girls because it is convenient. In fact, they just want to have a "little wife" here so that they are not alone and they can have safe sex. When they return to Taiwan for a while, their wife take care of their business. You also have those old peasants or disabled persons who come here to "buy" a spouse. Very often it is a young Vietnamese girl from the countryside. They let them line up in a hotel room, and then they choose. It is a pity, but maybe it is necessary for both parts. Anyway, this one was different. He took his time. At this moment we owned a restaurant and, for months, he used to come twice a day to eat. As he was living in a hotel on the opposite side of the street, we started to know him quite well. When he asked me about my daughter, I told him that she would choose freely. In fact, she accepted. Now they still live two blocks away from here....

I am back from Taizhong in Taiwan where I went to visit my third one, my second girl who just gave birth to a baby. I spent two months over there to help her. Her husband is a friend of my elder daughter's husband. He came here in Di An¹¹ to find someone, as in Taiwan he was so dedicated to the company he has created that he didn't find the time to find a wife. Then it was too late, he was over 45. In Taiwan, now, it is very difficult to find someone when you are that old. Beside that, he is still very busy. So once, he came here and my daughter's husband recommended him, and, that's it !.

This time, as her husband is working all day long, my daughter

¹¹ One of the previous names of Cholon. Some Chinese inhabitants sometimes still use this denomination.

wanted me to stay longer. I can see that for her, it is not easy to live there and she badly misses her family. But I also have to take care of my old husband as well as my youngest one here in Vietnam.

In the block where our study took place, this situation seems to be the lot of most Chinese families. Could it be one of the signs of a new spark of migration being underway? If we consider the two groups that we have observed, the wealthy ones feel at home and adapted. Those who want to leave are the unsatisfied who express their introverted anger or despair, those who dream of freedom, of an easier life that they believe to see when their relatives go back to Vietnam and spend so much money so easily. By trying to send their children abroad, they just naturally hope that they will escape the economic slump and enjoy a brighter future. For the moment, it doesn't seem that this form of migration will bleed the community of its members, but, on the long run, this soft migration of a part of the Chinese female population mustn't be underestimate. If it amplified, it could indirectly contribute to increase the proportion of Sino-Vietnamese weddings and consequently accelerate the dilution of the Chinese in the Vietnamese society.

This migrating situation also underlines the problem of the actual place of the group in nowadays context: has the community really found a new place, is it as wealthy a group as it looks like or is pretended to be as said in the economic magazines and can, again, the Hoa community play the role of bridgehead for a further return of investors of the Diaspora? In the second half of the 80's and the 90's, during the reform process and the political switch of attitude toward China, the Vietnamese government has officially reintegrated the community in the political social and economical life. Today the media reckons the successful integration of the Hoa in the "new society (Tran Trong Thuc 1999: 10) and highly prizes their economic success and patriotic attitude (Tran Nga 2000). However, as a Vietnamese official suggests, at the higher level the fear that there might be some pro Communist Chinese government elements left in the society or working at different levels of the administration still exists. In fact, the men in power

still worry about the fidelity of the Chinese and, somehow, seem to consider them as representing a potential danger.¹² The 97/98 crisis reinforced this ambiguous feeling as Chinese investors were considered as being part of the financial network that contributed to destabilise the whole region. This ambivalent perception is also visible in the daily life. In Ho Chi Minh city, if the Vietnamese usually consider the *Hoa* as being part of the society, they also perceive them as a conservative and mercantile population inclined to live together and not really willing to mingle. But, on the economical dimension, the *Hoa* represent an important working class. At the scale of our study, the new generation of Chinese businessman, small or bigger, is very dynamic. A lot of them are investing locally or working with, or for, Chinese companies from other south East Asian countries. Their small businesses or workshops employing ten or more workers are, for example, subcontracting for Taiwanese or foreign companies. As a working force they receive regular encouragement from the government. But down to the street level the group members say that the global situation in which the community is engaged today isn't any more the one existing before 75 during its golden age. Now, the *Hoa* entrepreneurs say that, in fact, the previous situation which would have made it possible to succeed doesn't exist any more and they feel that they no longer have the ability to get adapted as quickly as they would have in the context which prevailed before. Nowadays, indeed, the Vietnamese economy is a lot more integrated and dependant in the international context, submitted to its ups and downs as we have seen after the Asiatic crisis of 97/ 98, and also highly dependent of the development of its neighbours especially Mainland China. In the last ten years China has become a heavy economical power which not only influences the investment made in Vietnam but also the ones made in the rest of Asia. Of course, Vietnam is still a potential market for major companies, or middle size investors who seek to diversify in Asian countries

¹² Although, the Chinese government tries not to use the Diaspora for political purpose, the Chinese groups living in South East Asian countries still remain efficient links with the local governments (Doulet & Gervais-Lambony 2000: 154).

other than China but can't afford huge investments. But today, even if there is still a dynamic move of the Taiwanese investors in Vietnam for example, they no longer perceive the country as the Eldorado they thought it would be after the beginning of the *Doi Moi*, the economic renovation.¹³ The *Hoa* population suffers from these changes. Says a member :

I have been working here for decades. I think that now the business is getting slower. One of the reason is that the Taiwanese are fed up with the situation here. They came here immediately after the beginning of the Doi moi (the person uses the term Kaifang 開放). Then, the Vietnamese government promised so many things. In fact, nothing happened, the formalities are as difficult as they used to be, you still have to bribe everyone here as at each level of the administration you find corrupted people. To resolve these problems, many Taiwanese businessmen had to find a way. For example, they would marry a Vietnamese girl otherwise they could find themselves in a situation where they could lose everything, just like that, in a snap of the fingers.... After the crisis, many big companies stayed in Vietnam, but a lot of small Taiwanese factories closed their door as the economy was very slow. Now, many of them prefer to invest their money in Cambodia. So all the people who where working for or with them, found themselves without job. Here, in these streets, as we are in the very centre of Cholon, they where a lot of Hoa, working for these companies. So many of us ended up like me selling soup or vegetables in the streets, just as my father did before. For us life

¹³ One of the effects of the economical embargo imposed by the Americans after 1975, was that it became virtually impossible to the American Multinational companies to invest in Vietnam ... In the eyes of Taiwanese companies, Vietnam appeared like a "sanctuary" with low labour costs and cheap raw material. After the beginning of the *Doi Moi*, in 1988 and 1989, different official Taiwanese delegations visited the country. Shortly after, the rich Taiwanese companies started to pour their investment in Vietnam (The Economist-Bangkok Post service, 1990.05.28: 13; The Saigon Times, 1996.12.10: 14); Janssen Peter, Nguyen and The Chuong also insist on the fact that one of the reasons which led the Taiwanese businessmen to invest in HCMV was that a great number of Chinese from Cholon had their origins Fujian in Mainland China. Therefore, they would speak *minnanyu* 閩南語 making it possible to understand each others.

is not so that easy...

Today, the *Hoa* are still under close scrutiny, and somehow socially as well as economically tied up and controlled. Although, globally, it seems that the group has partly recovered the economical dynamic it had before 75 and is preparing for another step forward. The Vietnamese government particularly reckons the community as being an attractive force for foreign investment, because of the money coming from the relatives living abroad, and because, as a dynamic group, it creates new jobs and is a domestic and steady source of tax income.¹⁴ The community has therefore a major role to play, even if today it suffers technical handicaps, such as the lack of appropriate linguistic and professional training that would need to be overcome.

¹⁴ This point seems to be particularly important if we consider the decision of the Vietnamese government to try to rely on its own forces as well as to try to attract foreign investment, as suggested in this article from 2002 (Eastern Time 2002.09.07). "Domestic capital investment will determine the way the national economy develops", said Vietnamese Minister of Planning and Investment Vo Hong Phuc. Phuc told the local media in a recent interview that the disbursement of 112 trillion Vietnamese dong (VND) (7.46 billion US dollars) of domestic capital in the past eight months proved that domestic investment capital was capable of meeting the country's demands for economic development. He indicated that Vietnam plans to attract 60 billion US dollars in total capital investment during the 2001-2005 period, of which 40 billion US dollars will come from domestic sources. To effectively raise domestic capital to meet this goal, incentive policies on investment should be issued, promulgated, properly amended, and supplemented, said the minister, adding that the most important issue now is the effective management of capital sources. Phuc said that...In the first eight months of this year, Vietnam's foreign investment was less when compared to the same period last year. The reason for the decrease is that almost all foreign-invested projects this year are small in size and involved in light industry, agriculture, the processing industry and services. To attract more foreign investment, the minister asked for an acceleration of the improvement of the investment environment to ASEAN level. Improvement of administrative procedures must be the first priority while services prices for port, aviation and telecommunications should be the same as those in other countries.



**“For us, selling soup in the streets was the only way to survive”
(Photography M. Dolinski 2000)**

In this context, how does the group foresees its future ?

What happened to the community after 1975/78, can be considered as a kind of pendulum movement, its amplitude being without any doubt proportional to the power that the Chinese exerted within the Vietnamese society. Today, again, the group is useful to the country and its situation gives him some advantages. The Vietnamese government visibly wants to preserve this dynamic element, tries to integrate it while keeping a close eye on it. On the long run, the cultural proximity between Chinese and Vietnamese cultures will, without doubt, allow a slow but easy integration of this population as has been proven in the past centuries. Furthermore, the *Hoa* feel “at home” and although they are deeply attached to their roots and wish to preserve their traditions, they also want to be integrated in the society. In this regard, we can say that the group seems to look for a double and specific culture. The question is which form will, in the future, take this assimilation process ? Probably not the Thai model with a very wide domination on the society, on different levels, not only on the economic one; Probably not the Indonesian model where the Chinese dominate the economy but are very weak in other areas: probably not the Filipino model

where the Chinese are present in various fields of the society but where there is a heavy past of persecutions and a violent present. We believe that it will take a specific and very local form. The fact is that when in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and the Philippines, the Hokkien are in majority amongst the Chinese; in Thailand, Laos and Cambodia, it is the Teochiu who dominate the Chinese community. Vietnam is the only country of the region where the Cantonese group predominates. So, added to the fact that the relationship between Vietnam and China have got a long and deep historical common background, the result of this situation is that the Vietnamese Chinese can only develop stronger links with mainland China as it did with Taiwan, So we can believe that as long as they will be needed as long as a large and powerful Vietnamese commercial elite doesn't exist, the Hoa will be an important MasterCard of the Vietnamese government, Especially if, officially at least, they continue to accept to be the precious and consenting hostages that they are today.

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