

# THE FRONTIERS OF SOUTHEAST ASIA AND PACIFIC STUDIES

The lower half of the book cover features a complex, abstract texture. It resembles a close-up of aged, stained paper or a watercolor wash. The colors are muted and earthy, including shades of olive green, brown, tan, and grey. The texture is uneven, with darker, more saturated areas interspersed with lighter, more washed-out sections, creating a sense of depth and organic complexity.

Edited by  
Hsin-Huang Michael Hsiao

# THE FRONTIERS OF SOUTHEAST ASIA AND PACIFIC STUDIES

*Edited by*

**Hsin-Huang Michael Hsiao**

**Center for Asia-Pacific Area Studies**

Research Center for Humanities & Social Sciences

Academia Sinica

Taipei, Taiwan

2006

Published by the Center for Asia-Pacific Area Studies, RCHSS,  
Academia Sinica  
Taipei, Taiwan

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**Center for Asia-Pacific Area Studies Library**  
**Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Hsiao, Hsin-Huang Michael, 1948-  
The Frontiers of Southeast Asia and Pacific Studies / edited by  
Hsin-Huang Michael Hsiao

p. cm

Includes bibliographical references.

GPN 1009504490; ISBN 978-986-00-8256-2 (cloth) (NT\$500)

GPN 1009504491; ISBN 978-986-00-8257-9 (pbk.) (NT\$400)

1. Southeast Asia — Social conditions — Congresses. 2. Pacific Area —  
Social conditions — Congresses. 3. Asia — Boundaries. I. Hsiao, Hsin-  
Huang Michael

HN690.8.A7 2006

Printed in Taipei, Taiwan

## **Preface:**

### **A Taiwanese-French Mapping of Asia-Pacific Studies**

This volume is the product of the 2005 CAPAS-IRSEA-CREDO-MAP Symposium on New Frontiers of Southeast Asia and Pacific Studies, November 24-25, held in CAPAS, Academia Sinica, Taipei, Taiwan. It was a sequel to the 2004 Symposium organized by the three same institutions, held in University of Provence at Marseille, France, June 23-25, 2004. The first Joint Symposium has published two related edited volumes entitled "Identity Dynamics in Asia-Pacific" (in French), compiling all papers presented there, by University of Provence in 2006.

In the second Joint Symposium, a total of twenty four papers were presented by both French and Taiwanese scholars. In order to produce a more focused volume on the exploration of the frontiers of Asia-Pacific area studies, I have to make an executive decision as editor on how to select papers that can constitute a set of coherent themes and that, in turn, can map various important domains of the research frontiers in question.

As a result, fifteen paper writers were asked to revise their papers before submitting for review, and three specific themes are identified for organizing the revised papers included in the current volume.

The first mapping of Asia-Pacific research frontiers is related to the ethnic Chinese studies in Southeast Asia. Beyond the conventional and orthodox approach to overseas Chinese communities, the four papers included in Part I provide a variety of new concerns and diverse issues surrounding ethnic Chinese of or relating to Southeast Asia. Dolinski's paper deals with a new subject of study on the Cantonese Chinese who have remained in

Saigon (HCMC) after the unification of North and South Vietnam in 1975. The erosion and continuity of their ethnic identity are investigated, their adjustment to the new political regime is also observed.

Ko and Chang in their paper deal with another newly emerging issue of transnational marriage and the comparison between Vietnamese spouses and European spouses in Taiwan. The less studied migrant Yunnanese women in northern Thailand is discovered in Chang's chapter where those particular ethnic Chinese women in Southeast Asia are characterized as invisible warriors. Finally, an almost unexposed issue on how ethnic Chinese as a cultural "other" see and perceive Islam in Malaysia is then analyzed in Tsai's paper. A careful reader will certainly agree that the four chapters in Part I have expanded the frontiers of ethnic Chinese studies in Southeast Asia.

Part II explores the complexity of religions in Southeast Asian societies. Different aspects of Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Catholics, and Confucianism are dealt in the following five chapters. Guillemain and Dartigues examine the adaptive collaboration and sensitive role played by Catholic nuns in today's Vietnam. It is a very rarely studied topic indeed. Huang compares the transformed architectural elements in the layout of Confucian temples in Vietnam with that in Taiwan and China. It is a good case study of comparative cultural changes and that certainly can be elaborated further. Another case study of Hindu state temple architectural art of Baphuon in 11th century Angkorian Empire is presented in Yen's chapter. It argues that Baphuon temple served as the crucial foundation for Angkor Wat of Cambodia.

In another chapter, Tsai looks at the syncretism of Hinduism, Buddhism and even Christianity on Javanese religious music. Like Yen's work, Tsai's article also presents an excellent illustration of the complexity and richness of culture and art in both sub-continental and insular Southeast Asia. The fifth article in this Part by Husson deals with the arduous and hazardous haj for the Indonesian Pilgrims. Haj is an important step for Indonesian

Muslims cycle of life, but it is also a dangerous journey for them. This paper provides the untold stories of such massive pilgrimage. Once again, the five studies in Part II extend the boundary of religious research in Southeast Asia.

Part III maps the most important research frontier of Pacific islands by offering various rethinking of "tradition". Douaire-Marsaudon re-examines the much debated notion of "invention of tradition" in the South Pacific and maintains that it is fruitful to keep a lively dialogue between "inventionists" and "non-inventionists" for social scientific studies in the Pacific. Guo's chapter illustrates the significance of the performance of the "tradition of shell money making" in Solomon Islands. Tremon explores another Pacific "tradition of gamefishing" in French Polynesia. Pauwels provides a look at the symbolism, rituals and political organization around "boat" in Eastern Indonesia and Polynesia. Finally, van der Grijp in his article calls attention to the international trade of endangered species and the making of the predilection for "the exotic" in the Pacific islands. Such a study for sure has a very important policy implication.

The collaborative effort on mapping the frontiers of Southeast Asia and Pacific Studies by the fifteen Taiwanese and French scholars presented here in this volume is intended to facilitate more critical and constructive academic dialogues and exchanges between CAPAS and MAP (IRSEA and CREDO) in the future. Along with the first two books published by the French side, this current book produced here also hopes to expand and deepen the new field of Asia-Pacific area studies in Taiwan.

Hsin-Huang Michael Hsiao  
December 2006

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PART I

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**Reapproaching Ethnic Chinese in  
Southeast Asia**



## The Chinese of Ho Chi Minh City: Enriching or Surviving?

*Michel Dolinski*

### I. Introduction

The place of the Chinese diaspora in Vietnam as part of the greater Southeast Asian Chinese diaspora is quite unique. In Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and the Philippines, the Fujianese numerically dominate the other Chinese groups; in most continental Southeast Asian countries such as Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia, immigrants from Chaozhou are greater in number. Vietnam is the only place in the region where the Cantonese community outnumbers the others. This paper concerned the changes of demography and identity that affected the social and economic daily life of the Hoa who decided to stay in Vietnam while most of their neighbors fled following the country's reunification. For this study we focused on the process these families' integration into their host society as well as on their social and cultural evolution, considering the historical heritage and environment in which their ethnic group is rooted. Our aim was to understand the long-term development of the ward as well as the survival strategies of its inhabitants in relation to the changes that took place after the fall of Saigon in 1975 and the subsequent taking of power by the communists. We also considered the future prospects of this group within the current local and international context.

For the historical part of the research, we used original documents,<sup>1</sup> books, and updated data. But the heart of our approach was based on the analysis of about two hundred formal and informal interviews that we conducted in Mandarin in the 11<sup>th</sup> ward of the 5<sup>th</sup> district of Cholon between 1995 and 2000. Among the nearly fifty families that were visited, half have been regularly solicited. Final field research, completed in 2005, has allowed us to update our data and to partly reevaluate our previous conclusions. In this paper, we will briefly review the initial results, then

present our perception of the evolution of our target group between 2000 and 2005.

### 1. *Brief Historical Background of the 5<sup>th</sup> District*

Before the arrival of the French in Vietnam, the installation of Chinese migrants in the center and lately in the South of the country was encouraged by the Nguyễn, for economic as well as political reasons. During this period several communities settled in the territories that the Vietnamese had gradually acquired by matrimonial diplomacy or by force. The Nguyễn continued their Southern progress and used these newcomers--predominantly from Guangdong, Fujian, Zhejiang, and Hainan--to acquire new tools and techniques, to swell the government's treasury, and to let those industrious pioneers contribute to the clearing and development of the newly conquered regions. The Chinese became wealthy and powerful, and quite a few of them got involved in the political life of the South. In 1778, during the Tâyson revolt (1771-1802), some of these communities suffered the resentment of the rebellious population. Several groups of Chinese, hoping to escape the slaughter, fled southward. Some of them settled in a small village not far from Saigon, where they laid the foundation of Di An,<sup>2</sup> the future Cholon--the "Chinese Bazaar," as the French would call it later.

The city quickly became the commercial hub of the Southern delta as the Chinese organized large-scale business using the Mekong and its watery labyrinth to set up a wide commercial network reaching to Cambodia and Laos, and stretching along the main coastal cities of Vietnam up to China. In Cholon the five Chinese communities surrounded temples where they could worship their ancestors, gods, and goddess, and were they also built the congregation houses in which they held their meetings, deliberated, and ruled the communities. Different activities were grouped under ethnic-related corporations, the *hang* 行, which progressively developed into ethnic wards or larger districts where the different corporations would gather (Le 1931: 10).

During the colonial period the Chinese communities gradually grew in number, especially in the south, increasing their privileges and consolidating their economic power. Following the reunification of the country, their communities were playing a crucial role in the economy of the South. In the past, the different waves of migrants had gradually mingled with Vietnamese society, especially in Cholon, forming a large

population that political regimes before April 30, 1975 had barely been able to control. In the years that followed the communist victory, the authorities could not accept the economic hegemony that the Chinese still exerted. The political radicalization of the government as well as the worsening of the relationship between Vietnam and China provoked the exodus of the Hoa in great number.<sup>3</sup> Those who remained underwent the reorientation of the society and had to adapt daily life to this new situation.

## 2. *The 11<sup>th</sup> Ward*

Prior to the fall of South Vietnam in 1975, many of the prosperous Chinese from the 11th ward had already left Saigon, understanding that there would be no future for them in a country ruled by the communists. In the years that followed, another group of craftsmen and merchants also decided to leave. In 1978, after private trade was banned, a great share of the Hoa was sent to the new economic zones (NEZ), while others fled the country, especially between 1979 and 1981. At the same time quite a few Vietnamese peasants abandoned their devastated countryside and moved to the city, while former Saigoners also came back to town. In Cholon some of the buildings deserted by or confiscated from their original residents were occupied by these newcomers. Former North Vietnamese soldiers and civilians working for the new administration, who were encouraged to settle down in the Chinese city, occupied empty or confiscated structures as well. The numbers of these new Vietnamese residents helped to alter the ethnic population ratio in the "historical" districts, especially in the 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, and 11<sup>th</sup>.<sup>4</sup> According to our information, between 1989 and 2000 the Hoa accounted for 39.6% of the total population of the 5th district.

The population of Chinese shows a slow, relative decrease compared to the global population of H.C.M.C. In 1989, the Hoa numbered 433,551 and represented 14% of the population of the city; they were 524,000 in 1993 but represented only 13.3% of the entire population. In 1996 they were 550,000, representing 12% of the population of H.C.M.C., while in 2000, they were 620,000 and still represented 12% of the global population.

In 2005 a high-ranking official confirmed this slow but steady erosion of the group. To partly explain this process, he emphasized that the expansion of greater H.C.M.C., for the last ten years, has resulted in

the absorption of several neighboring villages, which naturally increases the proportion of Vietnamese residents. Concerning the 5th district, other specific factors seem to have emphasized this tendency. One of them is related to the urban projects (Nguyen 2003: 5) intended to ease the increasing demographic pressure on the city. The main objectives include reducing road traffic, improving the precarious situation of the natural habitat, relocating polluting factories, rehabilitating rivers, and creating large green areas. In the 5th district, which is one of the most densely crowded in the city, many programs are currently underway while others, initiated in the nineties, are near completion.<sup>5</sup> At the boundary of the 11th ward, new residential constructions have popped up, some of which are popular urban blocks, others more luxurious apartments.

As part of road-enlargement operations, many of the old houses from the colonial period are being replaced by narrow, contemporary-styled, multistory buildings erected a few meters back from the road. Most families interviewed complained that intense speculation in the ward has caused an uncontrolled boom of the real estate prices and rent, which were already very high because of the district's transformation into an active economic center. When their houses are razed to the ground, most expropriated residents receive from the contractor only a portion of the financial compensation to which they are legally entitled, often thanks to the complicity of corrupt officials from the local authority.<sup>6</sup> Since this money usually is not enough for the impecunious families to reconstruct new homes, they have no choice but to move to sometimes-distant suburbs, condemning many to shuttle back and forth everyday to work downtown where their activity has been going on for years and generates a low but steady income.

Between 1995 and 2005, some young couples have also departed from the crowded center for the sake of convenience. Most have settled down near the recently industrialized zones now located in the outskirts of the district or of the city. When asked why, they say simply that there they have more opportunities to find better jobs in Taiwanese or Singaporean factories.

The inhabitants also emphasize the increasing number of mixed marriages to explain the slow dilution of the Hoa population in the ward. This situation, which is considered a natural and inevitable result of the proximity of both communities, is particularly visible among the 25-to-30-year-old generation. The last point worth noticing, even if it



seems marginal, concerns the growing--if still limited--tide of soft migration made possible through arranged marriages with foreigners or by sending children abroad to study. Between 2000 and 2005 this situation has been amplified, as we will see in the next section.

## II. A Traditional Ward with an Integrated Dynamism

The urban social and economic architecture of the 11th ward is deeply related to its distinctive location at the heart of the 5th district, the center of Cholon. The site used to be a sojourn place for the arriving Chinese immigrants. Since its origins the geographical situation of the ward has justified the construction of hostels and lodges along the former Hai Hop and Testard wharves, at the crossroad of present-day Chau Van Liem and Nguyễn Trãi streets. Gradually, the place and its vicinity have become a hotel area. The nearby Chinese congregation houses and temples have also widely shaped the urban space and economic environment (Shen 2001: 365-380), resulting in the establishing of administrations such as the income-tax office, the central police station, many private and public schools, banks, sports arenas, etc. Furthermore, most of the commercial trade and industrial activities that though the years have spread around these centers of prayer and decision-making are in fact closely interwoven with this heritage.

### 1. *General Evolution of the Situation since the Beginning of the Eighties*

After the beginning of the Doi Moi, the creation of industrial zones as well as export processing zones (EPZ) attracted many international companies to H.C.M.C. and its larger area, giving the population new working opportunities. In the early stages of the process, the Hoa clearly took advantage of their cultural origin to find jobs in the Taiwanese, Singaporean, or Hong Kong-managed plants. During that period there appeared in the ward a wave of expatriated Chinese who thought the time was ripe to go back and invest in Vietnam, as well as some business adventurers and small entrepreneurs from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore who perceived Vietnam as a new "Eldorado." These pioneers, who were often between 35 and 50 years old, helped rejuvenate the economy of the streets as they opened shops, restaurants, workshops, and offices. Some of them quickly mingled with the population, learned