THE CHINESE DIASPORA IN SOUTH-EAST ASIA

THE OVERSEAS CHINESE IN INDOCHINA

TRACY C. BARRETT

I.B.TAURIS

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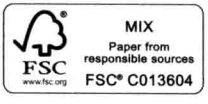

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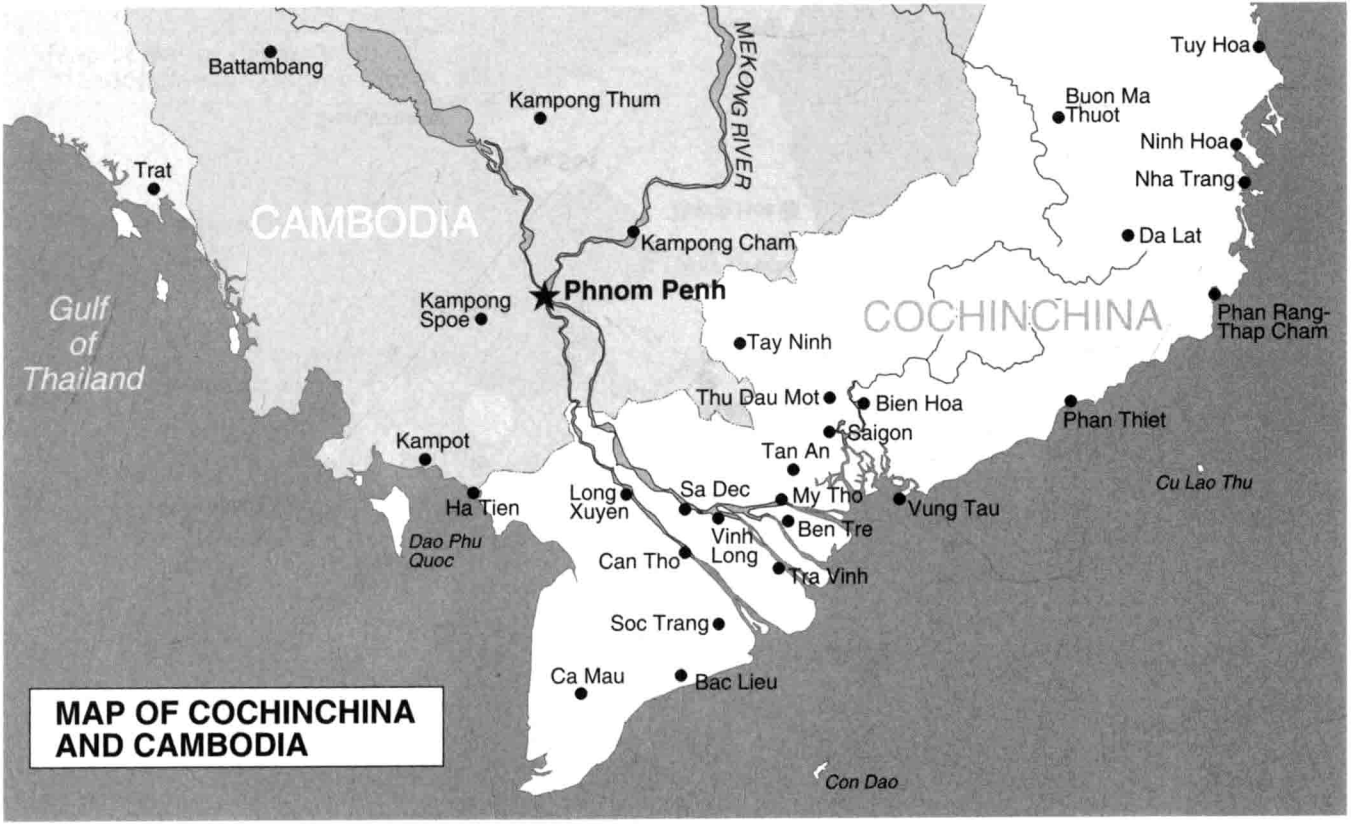
TCB
September 2011

A NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

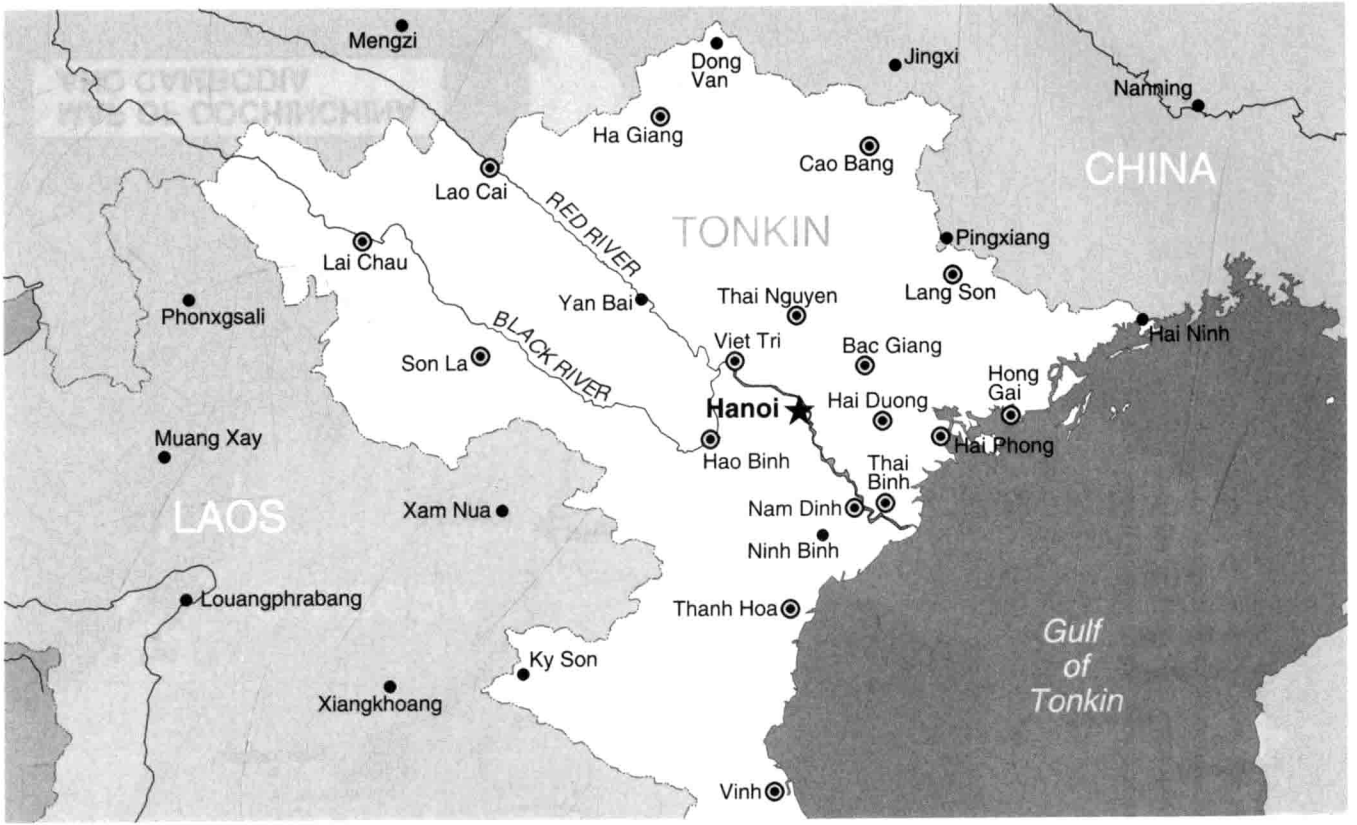
One issue that severely impacted the ability of French authorities to exercise control over Indochina's Chinese community also challenges the modern day researcher attempting to investigate those same communities and make concrete connections between its members: the problem of Chinese names. Every Chinese name had a Vietnamese pronunciation due to the fact that the Vietnamese shared parts of China's linguistic heritage. Originally, Chinese characters comprised the language of Vietnam's educated elite, the mandarinate. These characters were known as *Han*. Over time, a Vietnamization of these characters occurred, resulting in a written language composed of Chinese style characters with very different meanings, pronunciations, or even composition from any purely Chinese counterparts. This language was called *nom*. By the early 20th century in Vietnam, most texts were written in a combination of *Han* and *nom* characters, but by the time of the French, efforts at linguistic modernization intended to increase literacy rates across Indochina resulted in the promotion of *quốc ngữ*, the romanized version of Vietnamese characters still used today.

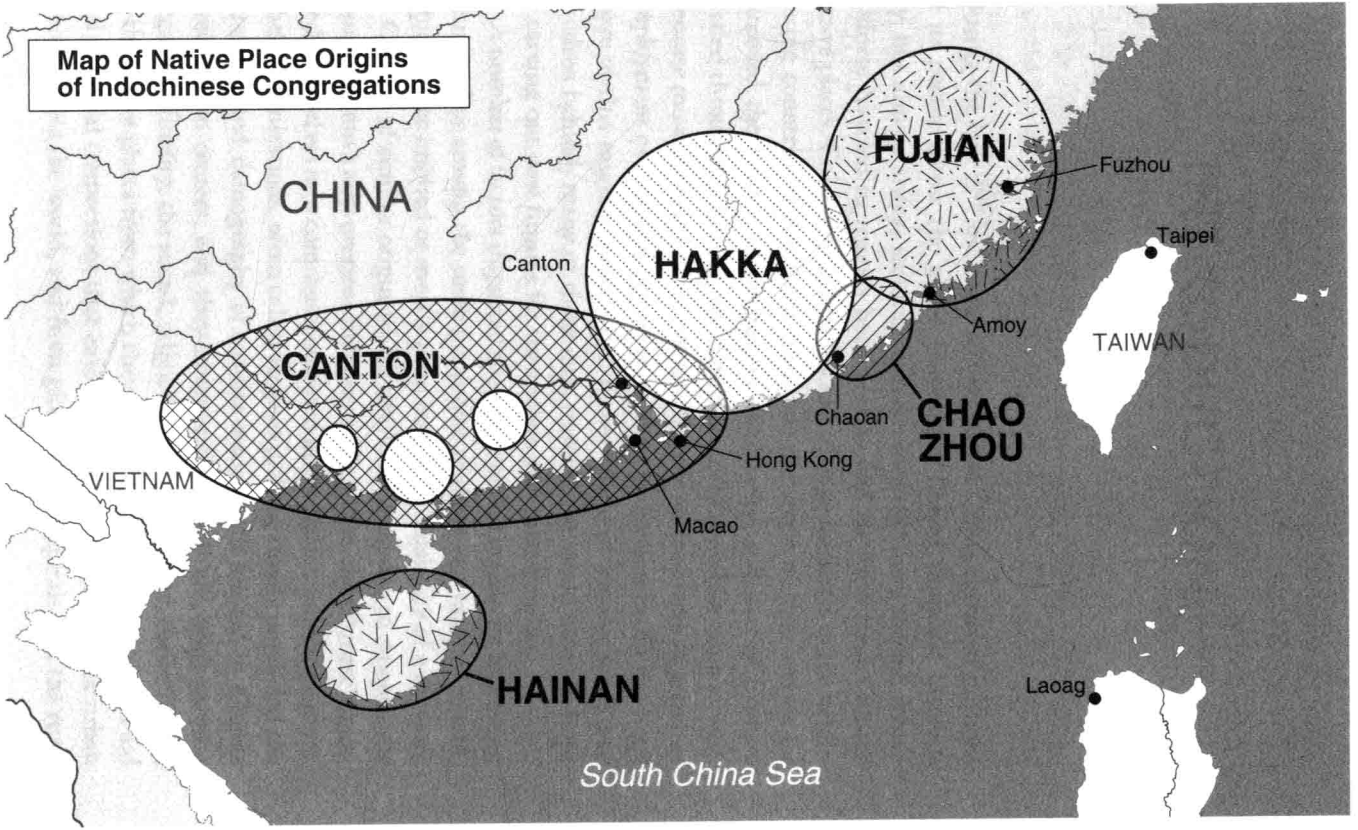
Because all Chinese characters had a Vietnamese pronunciation, all Chinese names also had Vietnamese pronunciations, and by the 20th century, many, if not most, overseas Chinese went by the *quốc ngữ* pronunciations of their names while they were in Indochina. The problem rests in the fact that one Vietnamese transliteration of a specific

Chinese character might actually be a homonym of dozens, or even scores, of other Chinese characters. For this reason, and because the generally colonial nature of my archival documents favors the use of *quốc ngữ,* I have generally not provided names in Chinese characters. In fact, many Chinese businessmen and notables in Indochina even used *quốc ngữ* when signing their names on petitions sent to the French that were written *entirely in Chinese.*



MAP OF COCHINCHINA AND CAMBODIA




Map of Native Place Origins
of Indochinese Congregations
CHINA
FUJIAN
Fuzhou
Taipei
HAKKA
Canton
Amoy
TAIWAN
CANTON
Chaoan
CHAO
ZHOU
Hong Kong
VIETNAM
Macao
HAINAN
Laoag
South China Sea

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INTRODUCTION

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, China exported millions of its people across the globe. Sometimes fleeing domestic instability, but almost always seeking to make their fortunes abroad, ethnic Chinese traveled to regions both near to and far from their Chinese native places. Chinese migrants flocked in huge numbers to the neighboring countries of Southeast Asia, but the scope of their travels far exceeded the bounds of geographic familiarity; millions of Chinese settled throughout Europe, the Americas, Africa, and Oceania as well. Because most of these Chinese departed their native places in search of employment or financial opportunity, men comprised by far the lion's share of this migrant population. Either single or leaving wives and children behind, many of these men traveled the world alone in hope of carving out new futures for themselves and their families.

A number of factors impacted the choice of destination for migrating Chinese, but among the most important of these was word of mouth, which either implied or overtly promised the availability of a network of Chinese of similar origin which would be available to smooth the transition into a new overseas life. Across the globe, the Chinese organized themselves into communities based upon dialect and native place. These organizations, often called *huiguan* or *bang*, closely paralleled the functions and demography of similar associations located in China's major urban centers, and they attempted to replicate, with varying degrees of fidelity, the social, religious, and networking environments of the native places from which they hailed. By providing material aid and financial connections that extended from China into major urban centers across the world, and from global urban capitals into the rural

hinterlands beyond, overseas Chinese communities existed within a framework of carefully defined and measured relationships that was essential to the functioning of Chinese trade and commerce wherever large numbers of Chinese settled.

Early pioneers of the field of transnational Chinese history, writing largely in the 1950s and 1960s, emphasized the "Chinese-ness" of the overseas Chinese, most often in Southeast Asia, and examined each community's faithful devotion to the institutions, cultural mores, and religious specificities of its Chinese native place.[1] But as the field has evolved, and perhaps most noticeably in the realm of Asian-American history, more recent scholarship has rejected the notion of overseas Chinese as sojourners, eschewing that label as based in Cold War and western post-colonial ideologies.[2] From the perspective of many Asian-American historians, the crux of this disagreement is that locale-specific variations in overseas Chinese institutions and societies contradict the notion of the overseas Chinese as sojourners by proving that overseas Chinese societies themselves adapted to better meet their own needs in the context of varied national environments. These historians often credit institutional racism with forcing overseas Chinese around the world to band together into Chinatowns and protection associations for their own security.[3]

The prevalence of anti-Chinese prejudice, legislated racism, and acts of horrific violence against ethnic Chinese are well-documented, not only in North America, but across the globe, and it cannot be denied that institutional racism painted, and in some regions continues to paint, the Chinese as "other," as inferior, and as dangerous to the economic well-being of the host state. It also cannot be denied that this multi-pronged racism forced the Chinese to become increasingly insular, especially when the Chinese resided in white empires such as Canada, Australia, and the United States, where they discovered that they were considered enemies of the host state and suffered from increasing restrictions upon movement, occupation, and citizenship.[4] But institutional racism is an insufficient explanation for *why* overseas Chinese gathered together in Chinatowns, *why* they established guilds and benevolent associations to promote their economic and political interests and to ensure the safety and security of their communities. Answering these questions leads inevitably back to China.