

**Chinese Rice Trade and Shipping from the North Vietnamese
Port of Hải Phòng**

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Abstract

This overview of Chinese trade in northern Vietnam explores the role of the Chinese rice traders there, especially in Hải Phòng, and their connections with Hong Kong and southern China, during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It shows they were never mere colonial middlemen but economic actors with ties to German and English business interests as well as to the French. The article traces what various primary sources can tell us of their community and business history, as well as revealing the intricate business ties of Chinese rice exporters in colonial Hải Phòng with German shipping companies, up until World War One.

Introduction

Chinese merchants dominated the rice trade from Tonkin (or present northern Vietnam) both before and during the French colonial period. This article traces the fortunes of the Chinese rice merchants of the northern port of Hải Phòng and the shipping connections with China and Hong Kong that supported the rice trade. It presents an overview which is necessarily sketchy in places, given the dearth of both primary and secondary sources on this topic, but which aims to add a new piece to the mosaic that makes up our historical picture of the complex networks of Chinese trade. In classic interpretations of the role of Chinese business in Southeast Asia, scholars spoke of the Chinese intermediary or "middleman" serving the European colonisers, and argued that the relationship gradually broke down as Europeans gained a firmer foothold in the colonies and anti-Chinese ideologies became more prominent. In the case of French Indochina, the French undoubtedly relied on Chinese intermediaries, but the relationship was never so one-dimensional in practice: some Frenchmen in mid-nineteenth-century Cochinchina, for instance, acted as both partners and as intermediaries or public faces of Chinese-financed enterprises,¹ while in the Tonkin rice trade my evidence suggests that most Chinese traded as foreign nationals in their own right, with little reference to the French. That is not to say there were no important connections with European colonial enterprises but rather, because Tonkin's exports went primarily to Hong Kong and China, such Chinese business collaborations were just as likely to be with British or German companies as with French ones.

Historical Studies on Northern Vietnam (Bắc Kỳ)

Historical studies into the role of Chinese traders in northern Vietnam during the French colonial period have been overshadowed by the fact that Chinese mercantile interests and immigration were principally directed towards Cochinchina and Cambodia in the south and much less so towards Annam and Tonkin (Bắc Kỳ) in the north.² In his overview of the Chinese in Southeast Asia, Victor Purcell underplayed the economic significance of the Chinese in northern Vietnam. He cited French historian Charles Robequain, who argued that the "Tongkingese" had "a real mastery, of trade and industry" and that this had resulted in limited opportunities for Chinese immigrants there. In addition, Purcell rightly argued that the densely populated north had only a small agricultural surplus and therefore a restricted foreign trade, which was "one of the

¹ For the complexities of business in the early colonial period in Cochinchina, see Étienne Denis, *Bordeaux et la Cochinchine, sous la restauration et le second empire*, S-I, Impr. Delmas, 1966.

² Victor Purcell, *The Chinese in Southeast Asia*, Second Edition, Oxford University Press, Kuala Lumpur, 1965, p. 6.

greatest interests of the Chinese".³ Robequain's appraisal was based on his comparison between northern and southern regions in 1937, noting that there were 171,000 Chinese in Cochinchina and only 35,000 in Tonkin.⁴ He compared the southern cities of Cho Lon, Saigon, and Phnom Penh, with a combined Chinese population of 106,000, to the northern cities of Hải Phòng, Hanoi, and Nam Định with only 20,000. In terms of the limited trade opportunities, it is clear that the volume of trade was greater in the south. Rice exports from the port of Hải Phòng, which was the main port for Tonkin in this period, rarely went over 200,000 tonnes; exports from Saigon, which however included rice from Cambodia, were five to six times the volume.⁵ Even so, I would argue that these comparisons between north and south have served to dissuade historians from pursuing further historical investigation into the Chinese in Tonkin and, without this, we continue to rely too much on Robequain's conclusions. Through extensive archival research into the trading of individual Chinese merchants in the north, this article moves on from the outmoded colonial image of Chinese as "middlemen" to emphasise instead the independence of Chinese business.

While French commercial interests dominated export markets like those for corn and coal, prior to the 1930s contemporary French observers readily acknowledged that the Chinese dominated the Tonkin rice trade. This aroused considerable interest in their political and economic power.⁶ Given the geographical proximity of Hải Phòng to China and Hong Kong, it is not surprising that China should figure prominently in public debate about Tonkin. Despite this, there has been no comprehensive study of Chinese economic activities in the north during the French colonial period. Chris Goscha has examined the early years of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, and has noted the importance of overseas Chinese (*Huaqiao*) in Hải Phòng in the late 1940s and 1950s.⁷ For the most part, however, it is the pre-colonial period that has received the most recent attention from scholars.

The Chinese in Nineteenth-Century Hải Phòng

Hải Phòng's location on the Cửa-Cấm River, with access both to the sea and connections to Hanoi and other ports on the Red River, made it geographically suited to the needs of international shipping during the late nineteenth century, when it was declared a French concession. By the 1920s, recognising that the river connections could only be maintained by ongoing dredging operations to remove silt build-up, Hải Phòng's suitability as the principle port came under scrutiny. Hà Long Bay was suggested as a more appropriate alternative. Prior to the French arrival, the centres for trade in the Red River delta had been more diffuse. In Li Tana's recent study of Vietnamese trade routes, she reminds us that prior to the fifteenth century the main waterway connecting Đại Việt's capital with the Gulf of Tonkin, and thus the China coast, was the Bạch Đằng River.⁸ By the seventeenth century, however, the river trade had shifted to the western branch of the Red River and the main international port was Phố Hiến. By 1831, when the town was renamed Hưng Yên, this port was no longer a significant commercial centre. In 1825 the records show that forty Chinese junks came to trade at Nam Định and Hanoi, these two ports being the main export centres for the

³ Robequain cited in *Ibid.*, p. 173.

⁴ Charles Robequain, *The Economic Development of French Indo-China*, Oxford University Press, London, 1944, p. 34.

⁵ Gilles Raffi, "Haiphong, Origines, Conditions et Modalités du Développement jusqu'à 1921", Doctoral Thesis, Université de Provence, France, 1994, p. 334.

⁶ *Revue Indo-Chinoise*, 15 August 1908, no. 87, pp. 153-4.

⁷ Christopher E. Goscha, "The Borders of Vietnam's Early Wartime Trade with Southern China: A Contemporary Perspective", *Asian Survey*, vol. 40, no. 6, 2000, p. 1008.

⁸ Li Tana, "A View from the Sea: Perspectives on the Northern and Central Vietnamese Coast", *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 37 (1), 2006, p. 96.

Red River delta.⁹ Hải Phòng was also an important port in the mid-nineteenth century. During the period from 1844 to 1846 a Dominican missionary, Manuel de Rivas, reported on the number of Chinese junks going to Tonkin for rice. He stated that in the port of *Hoa-phuong* (Hải Phòng) alone he saw more than three hundred junks. He calculated that each junk would carry an average of five hundred quintals¹⁰ of rice. He also noted that in Hanoi the amount of grain exported was even larger.¹¹

Early details of the Chinese involvement in the rice trade in Tonkin can be found in the letters of Pierre-André Retord, the Apostolic Vicar of West Tonkin. He wrote in the 1850s of his ongoing concern over famine in Tonkin. He laid the blame for it on the Nguyễn ruler:¹²

His system seems to be to impoverish this part of his kingdom more and more, [as] he treats it as a conquered country and his ministers exploit [it] to the profit of their greed. . . . [H]ere, our mandarins . . . strictly forbid the export of rice from one province to another. The forbidden traffic is then carried out by means of small boats; but the officials, who count on this crime to enrich themselves, look out for the smugglers, pursue them doggedly, confiscate their merchandise and impose heavy fines on them to their own benefit.

Retord contrasted the treatment of the local people with the favours extended to the Chinese, writing that:¹³

what they do not allow to the local people, they normally accord to the Chinese who, since they have a civil war at home, come here every year to get an immense amount of provisions. The mandarins make a fine front of wanting to chase them away; but these foreigners secretly give them some large sums of money, and because of that they are entirely at liberty to complete their business. Last year [1856] especially the Chinese came in great number to Tonkin, not to bring goods to sell there but quite simply to buy rice, for all commerce seems to have ceased in China: the ravages of the revolt and the English war have destroyed it.

Retord ended by saying that 1857 was yet another famine year and that rice was over four times dearer than at any other time since his arrival in Tonkin in 1832.¹⁴ Like all French missionaries at the time, Retord lived close to the local subsistence level and his words undoubtedly reflected popular views about Chinese rice trading activities in Tonkin in the 1850s.¹⁵

Li Tana's research on the Nguyễn tax revenue from overseas commerce for 1865 to 1868 provides evidence of the profits made on the export of rice, as well as through taxes on opium, tin, and hardwood. In 1865 and 1866 the tax on each junk engaged in river trade in Tonkin was 50 taels of silver. In 1865 a total of 157 junks paid 7850 taels of silver and in 1866 the tax collected was 5450 taels. The tax was increased to 75 taels per junk in the following year.

⁹ Li Tana, "The late 18th century Mekong delta and the world of the Water Frontier", in Nhung Tuyet Tran and Anthony Reid, ed. *Vietnam Beyond Borders*, University Press of Wisconsin, 2006, p.154.

¹⁰ One Spanish quintal equalled 46 kilograms, so the average tonnage was about 23 tonnes.

¹¹ E. Toda, "Annam and its Minor Currency", *Journal of the North-China Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 17, 1, 1882, p. 72.

¹² *Annales de la Propagation de la Foi*, Vol 30 (1858): 210-77, letter dated 24 June 1857, from Mgr Pierre-André Retord, to Abbé Laurens (France), quote p. 224.

¹³ Ibid: 224-5.

¹⁴ Ibid: 275.

¹⁵ Thanks to Nola Cooke for this information. For further discussion of this source see Nola Cooke, "Early Nineteenth-Century Vietnamese Catholics and Others in the Pages of the *Annales de la Propagation de la Foi*", *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 35, 2 (2004), pp 261–285.

In 1865, after some 8000 people died of starvation in northern Hải Dương province, the Vietnamese government introduced taxes on rice exports in an attempt to protect the rice supply. Nevertheless, in 1866 the Chinese traders asked that they be allowed to export rice tax-free for five years from Hải Phòng (the records refer to the port on the river Cẩm so this could possibly refer to Hải Dương). In return the Chinese would provide sixty-nine junks to help the Vietnamese government put down pirates in the area of Hà Long Bay, at the mouth of the river Cẩm. It was agreed, and these sixty-nine junks were exempt from the new rice tax. Apart from them, another twenty-six junks went to Nam Định and four to Hải Dương. These thirty junks bought 1,364,260 *cân* of rice,¹⁶ or 818.5 tonnes. With the tax set at 3 taels of silver for every 1000 *cân*, the government received 4091 silver taels from the trade.¹⁷

In 1867 the port of Hải Dương collected only 310 taels of silver from three junks, which was less than 10 percent of that from Trà Lý in Nam Định, where twenty-five river junks paid 5,563 taels. When asked why this was, the merchants from China said they were only allowed eight or nine days to purchase rice, and that if they took longer they would be regarded as “cunning merchants” (*gian thương*) and punished. The Tự Đức emperor asked the officers in Hải Dương about this and they reported that the Qing junks were small and their capital modest, so they were reluctant to come to trade. They asked the emperor to reduce the new tax, claiming it was too heavy.¹⁸

Similarly, initial French attempts to trade in Tonkin were limited by the Vietnamese court. In 1872, free-lance agent Jean Dupuis collaborated with the Chinese Peng Liji 彭利記¹⁹ and Guan Zuoting 閔佐庭 to buy rice and salt to sell in Yunnan. As the Vietnamese court had banned the sale of salt to Yunnan, both Peng and Guan were arrested. Dupuis, in turn, arrested the Vietnamese officials in Hanoi and Thọ Xương district. The Hue court sent officers to talk to Dupuis, with negotiations to defuse the delicate situation held in the Cantonese *huiguan* in Hanoi.²⁰

Bans on exports from Hải Phòng led to the port being all but abandoned by the Chinese, and by 1872 only a small Chinese trading presence remained.²¹ The treaty of 1874 with France changed all this by declaring Hải Phòng open to European and other commerce and by allowing the appointment of a French consul and a combined French-Vietnamese customs office.²² The export companies that came to be based in Hải Phòng included the French company Roque Frères, who were the local correspondents for Denis Frères; the French shipping company, A.R. Marty, which was based in Hong Kong; and numerous English-flagged ships that were chartered by Chinese compradors in Hong Kong.²³

¹⁶ 1 *cân* = 600 grams.

¹⁷ *Đại Nam thực lục chính biên, đệ tứ kỷ* (Primary compilation of the Veritable Records of the fourth reign of Imperial Vietnam), Keio University, Tokyo, Vol. 32, p. 6373; Vol. 35, p. 6437. Thanks to Li Tana for translating the data from Chinese.

¹⁸ *Đại Nam thực lục chính biên, đệ tứ kỷ*, *juan* 36, p. 6463.

¹⁹ *Đại Nam thực lục chính biên, đệ tứ kỷ*, *juan* 40, p. 6556 gives information on the Chinese Peng Tingxiu 彭廷秀 paying 50,000 *quan* of cash in 1869 for the revenue farm of shipping at the two ports of Nam Định and Trà Lý. Peng Liji 彭利記 may be the company name of Peng Tingxiu. I would like to thank Li Tana for providing this information.

²⁰ *Yuenan huaqiao nianjian/ Annuaire du commerce chinois du Vietnam* [Yearbook of Chinese commerce in Vietnam], (Cholon: Nanyue Zhong hua zong shang hui, 1953), p.34.

²¹ Raffi, “Hảiphong, Origines, Conditions”, pp. 41-49.

²² Robequain, *Economic Development of French Indo-China* p. 117.

²³ Raffi, “Hảiphong, Origines, Conditions”, pp. 113-14.

The Vietnamese Prohibition of Rice Exports

When the Vietnamese government instituted a further series of bans on the export of rice during the years 1876 to 1880, the Chinese rice merchants sent letters of complaint to the French consul at Hải Phòng, de Champeaux.²⁴ In 1878, de Champeaux noted that Hong Kong firms had lost all hope of the prohibition being lifted. The only exception had been that the mandarins had allowed Tonkin rice to be sent south to Đà Nẵng.²⁵ During this period the Chinese population of Hải Phòng was estimated to be only 850 persons.²⁶

In 1879 and again in 1880 the Chinese merchants of Hải Phòng sent a petition to the French consul, stating that if their demands were not met they would be forced to leave the country. They asked that rice be allowed to be exported to all parts of the world; that the navigation on all rivers be entirely free; and that interior customs be abolished. Some twenty Chinese merchants signed the petition.²⁷ One of the petitioners was Wang Tai 宏泰, a prominent Cantonese rice merchant based in Saigon.²⁸ Another petitioner was Ng Guan-Sing 吳源成, a Hokkien rice merchant also based in Saigon. At this time there was an indication of common purpose between Chinese and European traders, as demonstrated by the fact that the Chinese listed amongst their demands the opening of Nam Định to European trade. The ban on rice exports applied only to the French concession of Hải Phòng and did not apply to the Chinese merchants of Nam Định. Chinese traders with Hong Kong connections were concerned that their ships would not be permitted to trade out of Nam Định. The Chinese Merchants Steam Navigation Company, for example, sailed under English flag with English captains.²⁹

Writing to the Governor of Cochinchina in 1880, the French consul in Hải Phòng explained that already a good number of merchants had left the town. The Chinese, he stated, were pushing for the French occupation of Tonkin to bring about greater concessions for foreign trade. However, he explained, the Chinese had made it clear they could not be openly hostile to the Vietnamese government because of the nature of their centuries old relations. Their preference for maintaining favour with the mandarins, they argued, was all the more necessary, given that the French might still decide to abandon Tonkin.³⁰

The ban on rice export in this period was not total. The export figures for 1880 indicate that 25,630 tonnes of rice were exported, valued at over 5 million francs.³¹ The ban was lifted in 1881, but already it had become clear that the French concession of Hải Phòng would never achieve economic success while the Vietnamese government continued to give preference to the port of Nam Định.³² Within a year, however, the French arrived in force and began the conquest of Tonkin. Commandant Henri Rivière came to Hải Phòng on 2 April 1882 with 450 men. He took Hanoi on 25 April. Chinese merchants who had fled from Hanoi installed themselves provisionally in Hải Phòng where they could more easily reach the sea, and thus China.³³ In 1883 the French took

²⁴ Raffi, "Haiphong", pp. 84-85.

²⁵ Le Centre des archives d'outre-mer (CAOM), Indochine, Fonds amiraux 13177, Consulat de France à Haiphong à l'Amiral Gouverneur et Commandant en chef, 13 August 1878.

²⁶ N.B. Dennys, *Report on the Newly-Opened Ports of K'ung-Chow (Hoi-How in Hainan and of Hai-Phong in Tonquin*, Hongkong, Noronha & Sons, 1876, p. 41.

²⁷ CAOM, Fond ministerials, Série géographique, Indochine, Ancien Fonds, AOO (16) Signatures include Guan-Sing and Yuen tai Sing.

²⁸ Li Tana, notes taken from *Wang Qing Hai wai bi ji xuan*, [Overseas Travelers' accounts in the late Qing period] Beijing : Hai yang chu ban she : 1983, p.34.

²⁹ Raffi, "Haiphong, Origines, Conditions", p. 130.

³⁰ Champeaux, Consulat de France à Haiphong to Monsieur le Gouverneur, 1 May 1880. Indochine, FM SG. Anciens fonds, Carton 1, Dossier, AOO (16), CAOM.

³¹ Raffi, "Haiphong, Origines, Conditions", p. 122.

³² CAOM, Indochine, GGI Amiraux 13229, Consulat de France à Haiphong au ... Gouverneur, 26 July 1881.

³³ Raffi, "Haiphong, Origines, Conditions", pp. 148-149.

the port of Nam Định and immediately decreed that internal customs duties would be abolished on the Red River.³⁴ In April 1883, the French military seized and occupied the Hải Phòng warehouses owned by the China Merchants Steam Navigation Company.³⁵

Robequain wrote that the rice trading system in the Red River delta was different from that in the south. In the north, where rice farms were small and numerous, Chinese merchants did not deal directly with rice growers. Rather they bought rice wholesale in the rice markets of Nam Định or at the river terminus and then shipped it to Hải Phòng where they transferred it onto sea-going vessels.³⁶ He does not mention that it was the French occupation of Tonkin that transformed the geographical distribution of the rice trade. The French military administration forced all trade to divert to go past Hải Phòng by banning ships from using any other river route to the sea than the Cửa-Cấm. Nam Định, now denied direct access to the sea, ceased to be the primary export port, despite its history as a centre for rice collection. In order to control Chinese shipping the French announced a system of permits for all ships.³⁷ Three French customs depots were established in Hải Phòng, Hanoi and Nam Định and the first produce to be taxed was rice. Then in November 1884, the French passed another law, which limited exports to Hải Phòng, and thus completed the transformation of Hải Phòng from a minor trading port to the major port of Tonkin.³⁸

With the French firmly established in Hải Phòng, they set about creating the infrastructure to support large-scale trade. Between 1885 and 1887 a three kilometre long canal was cut through the town. In the newly re-shaped Hải Phòng, the main commercial port, which was almost exclusively European, was situated on the river Cửa Cấm, while the smaller Sông Tam-bac came to be regarded as the Chinese port.³⁹ The Sông Tam-bac was the river route to Hanoi and Nam Định. In 1884 the trip to Hanoi from Hải Phòng took twenty hours by river, sailing via the Lach-Tray, Lach-Van-Ue, Thai Binh, and Cua-Doc before finally arriving at the Red River.⁴⁰ In later years, the French completed the Yunnan to Hải Phòng railway line which provided yet another route for cargo, particularly transit cargo bound for Hong Kong. But in terms of the rice trade, the riverboats that plied the canals and rivers of the delta were the primary mode of transportation to Hải Phòng.

Chinese Merchants after French Occupation

The Franco-Chinese treaty of Tientsin, signed in 1885, allowed Chinese to enter and operate commercially in Vietnam.⁴¹ While the French occupation of Tonkin initially disrupted the Chinese population, it also had the effect of concentrating Chinese people in Hải Phòng. The Chinese population had been less than 1500 in 1883, but this figure rose to 4,700 by 1886. The Chinese population of Hanoi by contrast had dwindled to 850 persons. Bắc Ninh, once a thriving trading town with a Chinese population of 1600 at the time of the French invasion, had only seventy Chinese by 1887. Nam Định, once the major port for Chinese traders, now had a Chinese population of only 600.⁴² The steady growth of the Chinese population of Hải Phòng can be seen in the table below.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 150.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 158.

³⁶ Robequain, *The Economic Development of French Indo-China*, p. 310.

³⁷ Raffi, "Haiphong, Origines, Conditions", pp. 170-171.

³⁸ Ibid., pp. 173.

³⁹ *L'Annuaire de l'Annam et du Tonkin pour l'année 1887*, p. 259.

⁴⁰ Paul Bourde, 1885, p. 113.

⁴¹ Alain G. Marsot, *The Chinese Community in Vietnam Under the French*, Edwin Mellen Press, San Francisco, 1993, p. 114.

⁴² *L'Annuaire de l'Annam et du Tonkin pour l'année 1887*, pp 257-264.

Table. The Population of Hải Phòng⁴³

Year	Vietnamese	Chinese	European	Other	Total
1890	8,700	5600	600	200	15,100
1902	12,000	5300	950	75	18,325
1913	45,385	8532	1822	72	55,811
1923	63,578	13,538	1766	208	78,090
1929	74,599	20,186	2130	705	97,620

Unlike in Cochinchina, there was initially only one congregation for all Chinese in Tonkin. It was not until 1899 that the Hokkien were allowed to separate from the original Cantonese-dominated general congregation to form their own organisation. Although the merchant Guan-Sing was Hokkien, most of the rice merchants were Cantonese, like Hang-Wo 厚和, who was head of the Cantonese congregation in 1899. As an indication of the relative numerical strength of the merchants from these different dialect groups, the Cantonese Kah On Club of Hải Phòng, opened in 1894, had a membership of forty merchants and their employees, while the Phoc On Club, opened in 1896, only had a membership of eighteen Hokkien merchants.⁴⁴

In 1889, the Hải Phòng Chamber of Commerce was set up with eight European members, one Vietnamese member, and one Hokkien member, the ship-owner and merchant Guan-Sing 源成 (or 吳源成 mentioned above).⁴⁵ Guan-Sing had been one of the petitioners of 1880; and his presence in the Chamber of Commerce indicates there was some continuity between those Chinese who had asked for the French occupation of Hải Phòng in 1880 and those who gained prominent office in Hải Phòng in later years. From 1892 to 1896, Yuen-Tai-Ling took over Guan-Sing's place in the Chamber and he, too, was one of the original petitioners from 1880. It is not clear, however, that the position was anything more than honorary. The minutes of the Chamber of Commerce for 1892 show that Yuen-Tai-Ling 源泰琳 came to only one meeting and then excused himself from the next one. In November 1892 he wrote to tell the Chamber that he was returning to China and would not be able to attend any further meetings. Despite this, in 1893 his name was still on the records as a member and his apologies were duly noted in the minutes. In 1899 the Chamber of Commerce became exclusively European in membership. Nevertheless the Hải Phòng Chamber of Commerce continued to support the rice trade, protesting in 1899 over the export tax on rice being higher in Tonkin than in Cochinchina.⁴⁶

Apart from their seat in the Chamber of Commerce, the other position held by Chinese merchants was as members on the Hải Phòng Municipal Council. The preliminary council in 1887 included two Chinese, Guan-Sing 源成 and Tack-Long, who was head of the Chinese congregation. Guan-Sing was still a member in 1892, along with Wing-Sui-Tai, then head of the general Chinese congregation. In 1893, Guan-Sing resigned as Chinese councillor following his naturalisation as a French subject.⁴⁷ Two new Chinese members were appointed in 1895, Yuen-Tai-Ling 源泰琳 and Nam-Sinh

⁴³ Raffi, "Haiphong, Origines, Conditions", p. 338.

⁴⁴ CAOM, GGI 1896, Le Résident Maire, Hanoi à Monsieur le Secrétaire Générale de l'Indochine, 20 July 1896.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 201.

⁴⁶ "Rapport de la commission, Chambre de Commerce de Haiphong", *Revue Indo-Chinoise*, no. 25, 1899, p. 133.

⁴⁷ CAOM, RS Tonkin, 3819, Démission [resignation] du Chinois Guan-sing, conseiller municipal de Haiphong du fait de sa naturalisation française, 1893.

南成, and two more in 1899, Tack-Hinh-Luc and Charles Chong. In 1904 Kwong-Sang-Yuen 廣新源 and Kwong-Yu-Long were elected.⁴⁸

The Expansion of the Rice Trade

In 1889 there were some 65,000 tons of rice exported from Hải Phòng, almost all of it going to Hong Kong.⁴⁹ In that same year, 237 steam ships and 207 junks entered the port of Hải Phòng, not counting war ships and riverboats.⁵⁰ The number of rice merchants in Hải Phòng at the time was still quite small. In 1891 there were three Chinese rice merchants listed in the official records for Hải Phòng.⁵¹ The total Chinese population in 1891 had fallen from 5600 in the previous year to only 2000. By 1894 there were nineteen Chinese rice merchants, categorized according to business licences that ranged from first to fourth class. There were three first class merchants (Khen-Yune 建源, Shun-Tai 順泰 and Wing-Tuong-Cat 永通吉) six third class merchants, and ten fourth class merchants.⁵² The Shun Tai Company first appeared in the list of first class rice merchants in 1892,⁵³ and Tam Sec Sam 譚植三 of Shun Tai still appeared in the 1911 list as an exporter and ship owner. By 1934, the Shun Tai Company was one of the largest in Hải Phòng. Further details of this company are discussed later in this article.

By 1901 the number of rice merchants had grown to twenty-three, all but one being located in the rue Chinoise, close to the Chinese port. According to a correspondent writing for the *Hong Kong Telegraph*, the export of rice from Tonkin was entirely in Chinese hands and its organization was "one of the most perfect in the Far East". The writer was highly critical of the French government's treatment of the Hải Phòng Chinese, however, complaining of high licence fees, high taxes, and the requirement to purchase and carry identity cards. He was also critical of French newspapers, complaining that they regularly attacked Chinese merchants, accusing them of being in league with the Black Flags.⁵⁴

It is in the nature of the speculative character of the rice trade that it encouraged a high turnover of merchants. Thus the records show the Chinese names listed as rice traders over the next twelve years changed regularly, within an overall growth in Chinese involvement and in particular an increase in ship-owners who were also rice traders. The 1911 records include five rice merchants who were also ship-owners: Po-Yuen called Tchong-vai-Tchine 鍾家祥, Kuong-Tac-Hing 廣德興, Luen-Tai 聯泰 called Tam-Nang-Siou, Kong-Heng-Long 廣興隆, On-Fat 安發, and Hang-Vo 恒和. There are also six Chinese listed simply as ship-owners, Kwong-Sang-Yuen 廣新源 called Luong-Meng 梁明 or 梁盤三, Tze-Soy-Cheong called Wah-On 華安, Loy-Sing 來成, Tam Sec-Sam 譚植三 called Shun-Tai 順泰, Sine-One et Cie, Ly-Minh et Cie. Unfortunately, in 1917 this detailed information was removed from the Year Books and by the 1920s almost all records of Chinese companies also vanished from them, with even the street name "rue Chinoise" no longer even appearing in the street index.

German–Chinese Shipping Connections

By the end of the nineteenth century colonial trading ambitions in the region were reflected in territorial expansion, with strategically placed ports being taken over, either as colonies or as concessions. The Japanese claimed Taiwan in 1894; the Germans

⁴⁸ L' Annuaire, 1887, p. 267; 1892, p. 126; 1895, p. 223; 1899-1906; 1907, p. 267.

⁴⁹ Raffi, "Haiphong, Origines, Conditions", p. 216.

⁵⁰ L'Annuaire, 1890, p. 974.

⁵¹ L' Annuaire, 1891, p. 76.

⁵² L' Annuaire, 1894, pp. 126-27.

⁵³ L'Annuaire, 1892, p. 129.

⁵⁴ "Les Chinois au Tonkin", *Revue Indo-Chinoise*, No. 226, 1902, p. 143.

leased land from China, including the port of in Shandong (Shantung) Province, in 1898 and purchased the Marshall and Caroline Islands in 1899; the United States, which already had commercial interests in China, took over the Philippines in 1898. By the turn of the century, the German Admiralty was speculating that commercial and political competition might eventually lead to war against the United States and Great Britain.⁵⁵ In this context, French commercial rivalry with German shipping lines in the China Seas was also apparent.

In 1903 the French shipping company A. R. Marty complained to the Indochinese governor general that it faced fierce competition from a Chinese coalition that had extended its trading sphere to include Hải Phòng.⁵⁶ According to Marty, the Chinese coalition was formed in October 1895 to fight against their French shipping line that traded between Hong Kong, Haikou and Beihai. This coalition was instigated by the secret society Tsap Yet. The Chinese company Hop Sing 合興 and Co. sailed two ships under the Danish flag, while the Tsap Yet sailed seven ships under the German flag, chartered from the German firms Sander, Wieler and Co., and Jebsen and Co.⁵⁷ The connections between Chinese and German shipping had existed prior to 1895. In 1891, for instance, the German ship *Triumph* was consigned by the Chinese merchant Wang-tai in 1891 on the Hải Phòng–Beihai route.⁵⁸ In fact, the German company, Jebsen & Co., had entered the Chinese coastal trade much earlier. The founder, Michael Jebsen, opened his shipping company in Apenrade, Germany, in 1882 and entered Chinese coastal trading with the help of a Hamburg freight broker and German government subsidies. In 1895 he opened an agency in Hong Kong.⁵⁹ According to Hong Kong Chamber of Commerce records, the Hong Kong based Jebsen & Co. was established in 1895 by Jacob Jebsen and Heinrich Jessen.⁶⁰

The precise business connections between the German shipping company Jebsen and Co. and the Indochinese-based German firm Speidel and Co. are unknown, but during the early twentieth century Speidel and Co. was listed as the owner of the Jebsen ships. The relationship between the Speidel Company and Chinese merchants came under some strain in 1908 as a result of increased German involvement with Japanese trading. In that year, the Chinese rice merchants of Hải Phòng boycotted Japanese imports, in line with a policy emanating from China. In May 1908 the Speidel company ship, the *Karl Diederichsen*, which was usually chartered by Chinese, arrived in Hải Phòng with a load of Japanese products. The Chinese rice merchants' association sent a telegram to Speidel, advising them that if they transported Japanese goods Chinese merchants would no longer put their cargo onto German ships. As a result the ship owners were forced to return the Japanese cargo. When they made an attempt to unload four cases of Japanese lamps onto the wharf, the Chinese stevedores working on the Hải Phòng wharf refused to handle the cargo and the ship-owners were forced to bring in Vietnamese workers to break the strike.⁶¹

⁵⁵ Peter Overlack, "German war plans in the Pacific, 1900-1914", *The Historian*, vol. 60, no. 3., Spring 1998, p. 578.

⁵⁶ CAOM, GGI 6153, A.R. Marty to GGI, 2 June 1903.

⁵⁷ The Danish flagged ships were the *Alwine* and *Activ* and the German ships were the *Cosmopolit*, *Triumph*, *Mathilde*, *Apenrade*, *C. Diederichsen*, *J. Diederichsen*, *Michael Jebsen*.

⁵⁸ "Chronique Locale", *Le Courrier d'Haiphong*, 11 January 1891, p. 2.

⁵⁹ Study of Jebsen by Ernst Hieke, cited in P. J. Meier, "The Work of the Hamburg Research Center in Entrepreneurial History", *The Journal of Economic History*, vol. 21, no. 3, Sep. 1961, p. 368.

⁶⁰ The company still exists today, despite having had its assets liquidated during World War One, when Jacob Jebsen was interned in Australia. In 1919 the border between Germany and Denmark was redrawn and their home port of Apenrade became part of Denmark. In 1921 Jebsen & Co. was recognised as a Danish firm. In 1931 Heinrich Jessen died and his son Heinz took over the partnership. In 1941, when Jacob Jebsen died, his son Michael Jebsen took over and signed a new partnership in Shanghai in 1944. Hong Kong General Chamber of Commerce, "Member Profile", <http://www.chamber.org.hk/info>, accessed 16 December 2006.

⁶¹ "Le boycottage des produits japonais", *Avenir du Tonkin*, 10 May 1908, p. 2.

At the time Speidel and Co. had four ships trading into Hải Phòng, the *Karl Diederichsen*, the *Holstein*, the *Koenigsberg*, and the *Triumph*.⁶² An indication of the close trade links between Speidel and the Chinese merchants is that while all other sea-going vessels came to the French commercial port on the Cửa Cấm, the *Karl Diederichsen* and the *Triumph* were listed in the local newspaper as being moored at the Chinese river port. Speidel and Co., which had branches in Hanoi, Hải Phòng, Phnom Penh and Saigon, had been established in 1868 by the merchant Theodore Speidel of Saigon. It is perhaps significant that this company predated the occupation of Tonkin and may have had its earlier trading connections recorded in the National Archives in Hồ Chí Minh City. Speidel was clearly well connected with Saigon rice merchants, given that he had founded the Orient and Union rice mills at Cholon. Despite being a Saigon-based company, Speidel must have maintained some connections with Germany through his role as the German Consul. He died in Paris in March 1909 and the business was taken over by F W Speidel.⁶³

In 1909 all European traders in Hải Phòng became openly competitive in their dealings with the Chinese merchants. One possible catalyst for this was the change in administration. In September 1908 a new governor general, Antony Klobukowski, was appointed. Klobukowski, a career diplomat, had been Paul Bert's *chef du cabinet* twenty years earlier and had been appointed French consul in Yokohama at some point later in his career, after Bert's death in office in 1886.⁶⁴ His return was marked by an unusual degree of interest in shipping practices. In January 1909, the maritime commissioner at Hải Phòng informed the French shipping company Roque that a message had been sent by the new governor general pointing out that Roque was in breach of the Maritime Law of 1902 which required ships to have a French captain. The ship *Benthuy* was about to sail with a Chinese captain and was consequently refused permission to leave port.⁶⁵ Roque ignored the ban and the ship sailed, despite being denied the services of a pilot. This minor incident suggests that the new governor general might have had strong opinions about the Chinese and was apparently quite determined to see French interests protected. The extent to which Klobukowski's anti-Chinese stance might have reflected a corresponding pro-Japanese stance is worth further investigation.

In April 1909 the Chinese merchants of Hải Phòng commenced a boycott of all European shipping companies, following the announcement by the German, English, and French shipping companies that they were raising the cost of freight between Hải Phòng and Hong Kong by 30 percent. Given that almost all Hải Phòng's rice was exported to Hong Kong, this would have had a crippling effect on the rice trade.⁶⁶ A Chinese merchant interviewed by the *Avenir du Tonkin* newspaper stated that with the price of rice being so low they would not be able to afford higher freight costs. As a result the rice merchants had formed an association to become shipowners so that they could export their own rice directly to Hong Kong.⁶⁷

The Chinese rivalry with Japanese traders became clear when a Japanese merchant, seeing a potential opening in the market, expressed interest in expanding trade between Japan and Hải Phòng. He suggested that first it would be necessary to improve the quality of local rice by bringing in Japanese farmers to train the Vietnamese

⁶² *Avenir du Tonkin, Edition du Soir*, 9 January 1909.

⁶³ *Weekly Press*, 29 March 1909, Carl Smith Collection, Hong Kong Public Record Office, Image for 1015/00143481.GIF.

⁶⁴ "Chronique de Haiphong", *Avenir du Tonkin, Edition du Matin*, 30 January 1909, p. 2.

⁶⁵ *Edition du Matin*, 28 January 1909, p. 2; "L'inscriptions Maritime, Chronique de Haiphong" *Avenir du Tonkin, Edition du Matin*, 19 March 1909, p. 2.

⁶⁶ *AT du Matin*, "Boycottage des Chinois", *Chronique de Haiphong*, 11 April 1909, p. 2.

⁶⁷ "Boycottage des Chinois", *Chronique de Haiphong, Avenir du Tonkin, Edition du Matin*, 14 April 1909, p. 2.

producers.⁶⁸ Nothing further came of this, however, and shipping figures for Hải Phòng indicate that Japanese trade did not become significant until after 1913.⁶⁹

The Chinese rice merchants were successful in launching their own ship and were thus able to maintain their boycott of the European shipping lines. On 25 April 1909 the steamer *Tri*, belonging to the "Société Chinoise de Riz", left for Hong Kong with 18,000 sacks of rice.⁷⁰ No rice was shipped on European ships. This action by the Chinese threatened to ruin European trade in Hải Phòng and not surprisingly the French took action to protect themselves. In September 1909 the Hải Phòng Chamber of Commerce asked the government to ban the export of rice from Tonkin.⁷¹ Newspaper reports indicate that the governor general imposed the ban with the explicit intention of breaking the Chinese boycott.⁷²

Chinese trade reverted to using European ships after 1909. In May 1912, for example, two Speidel ships, the *Carl Diederichsen* and the *Michael Jebsen*, sailed for Hong Kong with 15,334 and 19,332 sacks of rice respectively, while two Denis Frères ships, the *Singan* and *Sungkiang*, sailed for Hong Kong with 18,267 and 17,124 sacks of rice respectively.⁷³ During this year, the *Carl Diederichsen* received considerable bad press from the *Courrier d'Haiphong* following a series of police raids uncovering hidden cargoes of kidnapped Vietnamese women and children. The head of the port police, Gentil, expressed his hope that the ship-owners would put a stop to this traffic, which he claimed had been occurring on German ships for the last twenty-five years. The newspaper reports pointed to merchants within the Cantonese congregation being responsible for the trafficking, but no single merchant was ever convicted.⁷⁴

The advent of war in 1914 resulted in an immediate end to German shipping into Tonkin. In that year, Standard Oil through its Hải Phòng office, offered to complete Speidel business in Yunnan Fu, Mengzi and Hekou under the name of Standard Oil. By 1915 Standard Oil representatives were concerned at the possible "embarrassment" of such connections. In April 1916, the governor general of Indochina was informed of Standard Oil's role and presented with business correspondence between the two companies. He was also requested to deport Standard Oil's Hải Phòng manager, Acton Poulet. By this time, F. W. Speidel was reportedly living in Sukabumi in western Java.⁷⁵ A list of German ships seized in American ports in 1917 included Speidel's *Carl Diederichsen* and the *Clara Jebsen*.⁷⁶ In San Francisco's Pier 70 in that same year, the newly built oil tanker, the *Wilhelm Jebsen*, was listed as being owned by Standard Oil of New Jersey.⁷⁷ In 1918, by way of compensation for the loss of German ships, the number of Chinese-flagged ships entering Tonkin increased from eight to sixty-four and continued at these higher levels.

During the war, connections between Chinese and German companies became yet another reason for the French to criticise Chinese business practices. In 1916 French ship owner, Paul Roque, reported that the ship *Ping On*, which was supposedly owned by Po Yune, was the property of Pou Hing Tai, through the intermediary of Charles and

⁶⁸ "Le commerce du riz", Chronique de Haiphong, *Avenir du Tonkin, Edition du Matin*, 15 April 1909.

⁶⁹ Raffi, "Haiphong, Origines, Conditions", p. 602.

⁷⁰ "Le Boycottage des Chinois, Chronique de Haiphong", *Avenir du Tonkin, Edition du Matin*, 25 April 1909, p. 2.

⁷¹ "Chronique de Haiphong", *Avenir du Tonkin, Edition du Matin*, 9 September 1909.

⁷² "Chronique de Haiphong", *Avenir du Tonkin, Edition du Matin*, 16 September 1909, p. 2.

⁷³ "Le Commerce" *Le Courrier d'Haiphong*, 7 May 1912.

⁷⁴ "Rapt d'enfants, Chronique Locale", *Le Courrier d'Haiphong*, 30 January 1912.

⁷⁵ CAOM, GGI, 2009. Report from the Resident Superior of Tonkin to the Governor General of Indochina, 5 April 1916.

⁷⁶ "Executive Order Taking Over German Vessels in American Ports, Joint Resolution adopted by Congress, June 30, 1917", *The American Journal of International Law*, vol. 11, no. 4, Supplement: Official Documents, pp. 199-201.

⁷⁷ <http://pier70sf.org/history/shipsBuilt/ShipsBuiltAll.html>. Accessed 15 December 2006.

Co., compradores of the Banque de l'Indochine at Hải Phòng. He accused Charles and Co. of having worked with the Germans, Speidel and Jebsen.⁷⁸ If correct, this statement gives some indication of the complex connections of Chinese merchants and the potential difficulties involved in trying to gauge the strength of Chinese trading from official shipping lists alone.

French Responses to Chinese Traders, 1925–1934

The nationalist sentiments of the local French authorities can be seen in a letter of complaint to Shun Tai in 1925 from the mayor of Hải Phòng. It accused him of lacking respect for French traditions by failing to raise the flag in honour of the national holiday. The young Tam Seng Sec, signing himself as Shun Tai, responded with an elegant and apologetic letter, stating that in regard to his two ships, the *New Mathilde* and the *Borneo*, he had assumed that the captains would know the requirements without being reminded by him on each occasion and that he was sorry for having forgotten to go and check the ships on the wharf. Although he signed himself the humble servant of the mayor, his tone seems to suggest that he regarded such complaints as trivial.⁷⁹ In fact, it was a very short stroll from the Shun Tai shopfront (on 149-151, rue Chinoise) to the wharf.⁸⁰ We do not know whether the German shipping companies maintained an interest in Indochina in this period, but these two ship's names, *Borneo* and *Mathilde*, had belonged to German ships connected with Chinese merchants prior to the war, thus suggesting some sort of continuity.

As in the early years, the issue of restrictions on rice export continued to be a theme in the relative strength of rice trade. In 1925 the export of rice from Hải Phòng was restricted once more and rice traders forced to apply to the resident superior of Tonkin for permission to export rice. Happily, this process provides historians with some evidence of the strength of Chinese trade, given that by this time much of the detailed records of Chinese businesses were no longer recorded in the Year Books. Many requests were for permission to export 1,000 tonnes, but the largest requests in 1927 came from Kwang Man Yuen of Hong Kong, asking to export 10,000 tonnes, and from Shun Tai, to export 10,000 tonnes to Hong Kong. A second request was submitted from Tam Seng Sec 譚植三 (director of Shun Tai 顺泰), but it was made in his role as director of the rice mill Rizerie Tchoune Yeck in Hà Lý on the outskirts of Hải Phòng.⁸¹

Relations between French officials and the Chinese merchants of Hải Phòng reached something of a crisis point in August 1927 when anti-Chinese riots broke out in Hải Phòng, lasting several days. A letter describing their plight from the Chinese residents of Hải Phòng was published in a Cantonese newspaper *Lingdong Minguo ribao*.⁸²

Old persons of 70 years or small children of a few years were killed disregarding their age. Sometimes, the Annamite soldiers co-operated with the mob to massacre the Chinese. During the whole trouble, about 200 Chinese were killed or disappeared, to say nothing of the number wounded. Why should the Chinese suffer such cruelty? The bandits are daily selling the looted articles and walking proudly in the streets with no intervention from the French soldiers being feared. ...Many families have been completely destroyed. Numerous persons are homeless and shelter in the Chinese congregations or guilds.

⁷⁸ Raffi, "Haiphong, Origines, Conditions", p. 375.

⁷⁹ Archives diplomatiques de Nantes, RSTAF, 36457, Shun Tai to Monsieur l'Administrateur Maire de la ville de Haiphong, 16 November 1925.

⁸⁰ *L'Annuaire*, 1905, Liste Générale de fonctionnaires, commerçants, industries, etc. de la Ville de Haiphong.

⁸¹ Hanoi National Archives no.1, RS Tonkin, 33677, 40864, 40880.

⁸² Archives diplomatiques de Nantes, Pekin Ambassade, Serie A, 288, 6 September 1927.

The Hải Phòng branch of the Kuomintang appealed to the Chinese Nationalist government, asking for them to send a war ship to protect their citizens. It was to no avail at the time, although in 1928 Chu Chao Hsin, the Vice Minister of External Affairs of the Nationalist Government in China, did send a delegation to Hải Phòng to inquire into the financial losses sustained by its Chinese merchants and to demand the Indochina government pay indemnities.

The French authorities intercepted and translated letters, often sent from Nam Định, the closest river port to Hải Phòng and where Chinese had fled for safety. One letter was sent to parents in Macao, another to Saigon and a third to Canton. The extent of the Chinese networks in this period was such that the Central Committee of the Kuomintang in Nanjing then sent letters to all sections of the Kuomintang, including in places like Phnom Penh, describing the plight of their "emigrant brothers" in Hải Phòng.

The French authorities had compiled a list of sixty-nine Chinese shops, factories, companies, ships, and junks which were pillaged, detailing the owners and the extent of the damage, which ranged from broken windows to complete destruction; one business estimated its damage at 6000 piastres. Luong-Cheong-Hoi and Kwong Vo Hinh, rice mill owners, had sacks of rice stolen; two junks in the Chinese port on the Song-Tam-Bac river were pillaged and one junk from Quảng Yên on the Canal Bonnal was completely burnt; the Fong Ly Seng rice mill had 600 sacks of rice stolen and 3000 piastres in cash.

The attacks had been directed at all Chinese, not merely big business. Victims included butchers, pharmacies, and opium sellers. Alexander Woodside, in describing the "August 17 massacre", described Hải Phòng as a city "where ethnic differences were least reinforced or exacerbated by economic gaps or by a conjunction of ethnicity and class. Hải Phòng Chinese tended to be workers, sailors, and shop employees, unlike the richer Chinese rice mill owners and businessmen of the more peaceful southern urban complex of Saigon-Cholon".⁸³ Esta Ungar similarly noted that the French government had imported 2,000 Chinese workers into Hải Phòng in 1926 and that the severity of the riots was blamed on the fact that Chinese workers were paid at higher rates than Vietnamese workers. French reports also indicated that the Third Communist International (Comintern) had decided to provoke communist revolutionary action in Indochina between 15 and 20 August 1927, leading to some speculation as to whether they were involved in the riots.⁸⁴

Even so, Woodside underestimated the wealth of the Hải Phòng rice merchants, and the extent to which Chinese capital was targeted during the riots. According to Ungar:⁸⁵

Of thirteen dead, twelve were Chinese and one Vietnamese. The number of persons wounded was over one hundred. Twenty Chinese were arrested compared with 145 Vietnamese as of 29 August. According to a report by the Chinese of Hải Phòng that was sent to the Office of Overseas Affairs in Guangzhou, 320 persons were also ruined financially and damages were calculated at above 307,000 piasters. . . . Many Chinese residents were so upset by their experiences that they decided to return to China.

French official reports revealed that the Chinese had decided on 8 August 1927, to instigate a boycott of Japanese goods. Some Chinese speculated that the Japanese were somehow behind the riots.⁸⁶ Certainly the riots were quite specifically directed at

⁸³ Alexander Woodside, *Community and Revolution in Modern Vietnam*, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, 1976, p. 66.

⁸⁴ Esta S. Ungar, "The Nationalists and an Overseas Chinese Community: Vietnam, 1927", in John Fitzgerald (ed.), *The Nationalists and Chinese Society 1923-1937: A Symposium*, Parkville, History Department, University of Melbourne, 1989, pp. 95-99.

⁸⁵ Ungar, "The Nationalists and an Overseas Chinese Community", p. 102.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

Chinese business, with the French business sector virtually untouched. Of twenty-two European-owned factories, only the Rizerie Indochinoise was closed for twelve days. Of the twenty Chinese-owned factories all were closed on the 20 August and most stayed closed until the 28 August. These included five rice mills owned by Shun Tai, Hop-Long, Shun-Fat-Yune, Fong Ly Seng, and Luong Cheong Hoi.⁸⁷

Soon after this incident, the Chinese Nationalist Government took action to secure the position of the Chinese expatriate community by concluding the Nanjing convention of 1930 that gave Chinese residents in Vietnam the status of foreigners with special privileges.⁸⁸ These special privileges were of little use, however, in protecting Chinese merchants from the onset of the world depression. During the depression Chinese merchants suffered heavy financial losses, and were forced to sell rice at low prices to meet liabilities with colonial banks. Martin Murray noted that between 1929 and 1932 there were 236 bankruptcies and twenty-four legal liquidations in Saigon-Cholon.⁸⁹

Similarly, Resident Superior Tholance of Tonkin, wrote to the governor general that those hardest hit by the economic crisis in the north of the colony were involved in the export trade in Hải Phòng, which was almost entirely in the hands of the Chinese. But amongst all the companies that had gone bankrupt, the impending failure of Shun Tai would be literally catastrophic for trade in Hải Phòng, he warned. The company had suffered difficulties in 1921, when Tam Tsec Sam, the head of the company, had died and Shun Tai had been taken over by his widow and his eldest son, Tam Seng Sec. But its current debt with the Bank of East Asia was \$120,000 and, as the bank had closed its Hải Phòng branch, it was unwilling to consider any propositions by Tam Seng Sec. The governor general wrote within a few days to the French consul in Hong Kong, asking that he approach the Bank of East Asia to ask them to lift their veto, and to listen to what Tam Seng Sec had to offer. He added that if the bank understood the market in Tonkin better it might take a stance more favourable to Chinese commerce.⁹⁰ There is some irony in the French colonial government being forced to plead for more favourable conditions for Chinese commerce, and for negotiations between a Cantonese bank and a Cantonese merchant. This aspect of Chinese–French cooperation was clearly the result of the unprecedented financial crisis brought on by the world depression.

In their study of Chinese enterprise in colonial Malaya, Lian Kwen Fee and Koh Keng We describe the period between 1900 and 1940 as one that "saw a significant shift away from partnership between Chinese entrepreneurs and British rulers".⁹¹ There appears to have been a similar shift in French Indochina, with French protectionism manifesting itself in the form of stricter regulation of Chinese enterprise. On the other hand, in the port of Hải Phòng, where the Chinese held a clear monopoly over the export trade, the attitudes of French officials were necessarily tempered by pragmatic and wider considerations as compared with those of the French business.

Conclusion

This overview of Chinese trade in northern Vietnam suggests some sense of continuity in terms of the relationship between Chinese business and French colonial officials. In 1880 the Chinese rice merchants of Hải Phòng had asked the French authorities to

⁸⁷ Notes that in 1899 the name "Luong-Cheong-Hoi dit Shun-Ly" appears on the *Annuaire* list as a rice merchant. p. 246–47. In the 1901 *Annuaire*, Shune Ky dit Luong-cheong-Hai is listed as a rice merchant in 156, rue Chinoise.

⁸⁸ Marsot, *The Chinese Community*, p. 53.

⁸⁹ Martin J. Murray, *The Development of Capitalism in Colonial Indochina (1870–1940)*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1980, p. 459.

⁹⁰ Archives diplomatiques de Nantes, Hong Kong Consulate, 64 liasses (27), Resident Superior of Tonkin to Governor General of Indochina 11 July 1934; Governor General of Indochina to French Consul, Hong Kong, 17 July 1934.

⁹¹ Lian Kwen Fee and Koh Keng We, "Chinese Enterprise in Colonial Malaya: the Case of Eu Tong Sen", *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 35 (3), p. 417.

intervene on their behalf against the ban on rice trade, in this case for the French to colonise Tonkin so as to create conditions more favourable to Chinese trade. In the 1930s, in the face of the world depression and yet another threat to Chinese trade, the Chinese merchants again sought French intervention. Undoubtedly the French were motivated to help because they recognised that, without Chinese trade, the port of Hải Phòng would provide little profit for the French empire.

Quite apart from the French concerns, however, it is clear that there was a significant degree of foreign mercantile interest in Indochina, including Japanese, German, and American interests. In the case of the Germans, there is evidence that they collaborated closely with local Chinese merchants, not only in Hải Phòng but also in Hong Kong and Mainland China. The Japanese, on the other hand, were rivals for Chinese trade. Further study on the relative strength of European co-operation with Japanese, as opposed to Chinese, is needed for us to understand the importance of the Japanese in northern Vietnamese trade at this time.

While the Chinese rice merchants were necessarily required to work within the constraints of the French colonial system, it seems that important companies such as Shun Tai were far from being subservient to French interests. Rather, interactions between German and Chinese companies, particularly in the context of boycotts of Japanese goods, suggests that the Chinese recognised themselves to be in a position of some strength. They provided the cargoes that allowed the European shipping lines to make a profit and when those relations became strained, they were prepared to provide the ships as well.