

THE IMPRINT OF HOA PEOPLE (CHINESE) IN THE ESTABLISHMENT AND DEVELOPMENT OF COMMERCIAL HUBS IN SOUTHERN VIETNAM (IN THE 17th - 19th CENTURY)

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Abstract

Throughout the reclamation and development of Southern Vietnam, in addition to the active role of Vietnamese people, it is worth mentioning the large contribution of other communities, notably the Chinese one. Due to geographical characteristics compared to other countries in the region, Hoa people migrated to Vietnam quite early. By the 17th century, Hoa people were present throughout the Northern, Central and Southern Vietnam. However, in Northern Vietnam, Chinese communities are often scattered and small - a stark contrast to the large and concentrated counterparts in the Central and the South. In the process of settlement in Southern Vietnam, Hoa people have participated in all economic sectors and have affirmed their position, especially in commercial operations. The presence of Hoa people in Southern Vietnam for centuries (especially in the 17th-19th century) not only played a crucial role in promoting the founding of cities such as Nong Nai Dai Pho (農耐大街); My Tho Dai Pho (美荻大街); Ha Tien commercial port (河仙港市); Cho Lon (堤岸), etc., but their economic activities also contributed to turning those cities into bustling and prosperous commercial hubs, which laid the foundation for the commodity economy to grow later in the South.

Keywords: Hoa people, Southern Vietnam, commercial, economy, 17th-19th century

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I. Introduction

According to many sources, Hoa people was present in Vietnam as early as at the beginning of the Common Era⁴ (Nguyen Cam Thuy, 2000, p.6). Soldiers and troops aside, the fact that Hoa people migrated to Vietnam and settled here was common after many civil wars in China⁵. During the time from the 17th century to the 19th century, merchants, court officials and military officers who failed in the "Phản Thanh phục Minh" (Fan Qing Fu Ming-反清復明) (lit.: Oppose the Qing dynasty and restore the Ming dynasty) movement in China fled to Dang Trong (lit.: Inner Land) of Vietnam. After that, Lord Nguyen Phuc Tan sent them to explore new territories in the Southern region. Through time, Hoa people established their villages and cities, as well as formed stable and developed Chinese communities which became a part of Vietnamese ethnic groups. The presence of Hoa people in Southern Vietnam for centuries (especially from the 17th to the 19th century) left significant imprints with bustling cities and important regional and international hubs for trade and goods transportation. Four prominent commercial hubs were Nong Nai Dai Pho; My Tho Dai Pho; Ha Tien commercial port; and Cho Lon⁶.

Notable research works relating to this issue, including: Phan Huy Le (chief author) 2017. *Vùng đất Nam Bộ quá trình hình thành và phát triển* (Southern Vietnam: Formation and Development), Li Tana 1999. *Xứ Đàng Trong – Lịch sử kinh tế – xã hội Việt Nam thế kỷ XVII – XVIII* (Dang Trong - History of Vietnamese economy and society in the 17th - 18th century), Choi Byung Wook 2010. *Vùng đất Nam Bộ dưới triều Minh Mạng* (Southern Vietnam under the reign of Minh Mang), Le Xuan Diem 2002. *Bước đầu tìm hiểu sự hình thành & phát triển đô thị ở Nam Bộ* (Initial understanding of the formation & development of cities in Southern Vietnam), Huynh Ngoc Dang 1999. *Chính sách của chính quyền Đàng Trong đối với người Hoa từ năm 1600 đến năm 1777* (Policies of Dang Trong government for Hoa people from 1600 to 1777), Fujiwara Riichiro 1974. *Chính sách đối với dân Trung Hoa di cư của các triều đại Việt Nam* (Vietnamese Dynasties' Policies toward Chinese Immigrants), Nguyen Van Huy 1973. *Người Hoa ở Việt Nam* (Hoa people in Vietnam), Ngo Ai Long 1998. *Người Hoa và công cuộc khai phá vùng đất Sài Gòn - Gia Định* (Hoa people and the reclamation of Sai Gon - Gia Dinh), Tran Khanh 1992. *Vai trò của người Hoa trong nền kinh tế các nước Đông Nam Á* (The role of Hoa people in the economy of Southeast Asian countries), Nguyen Cam Thuy 2000. *Định cư của người Hoa trên đất Nam Bộ (từ thế kỷ XVII đến năm 1945)* (The settlement of Hoa people in Southern Vietnam (from the 17th century to 1945), A.B. Woodside 1988. *Vietnam and the Chinese Model: A Comparative Study of Nguyen and Ching Civil Government in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge (Massachusetts) and London; Nola Cooke 1994. "Nineteenth Century Vietnam Confucianization in Historical Perspective: Evidence from Palace Examination 1463-1883", *JSEAS* 25; Anthony Reid 1997. *The Last Stand of Asian Autonomies* –

⁴ According to various sources, Hoa people were present in Vietnam in around the second century BC.

⁵ Periods of Duong (唐朝) - Tong transition (宋朝初期) (960-1279); Tong (宋朝末期) - Nguyen transition (元朝初期) (1279-1368); Nguyen (元朝末期) - Minh transition (明朝初期) (1368-1644); and Minh (明朝末期) - Thanh transition (清朝初期) (1644-1911).

⁶ In Nong Nai Dai Pho, My Tho Dai Pho and Ha Tien commercial port, the role of Hoa people was only sustained for a time, then weakened with the fall of those cities. However, in Cho Lon, the role of Chinese's commercial operations remained and constantly grew. From a commercial city in the 18th century, it has now become one of the busiest commercial cities in Vietnam.

Responses to Modernity in the Diverse States of Southeast Asia and Korea, 1750-1900, Houndmills, London, etc., all support the aforesaid argument. I also agree with the perspective of these scholars. However, these works only stopped at a general view of the Hoa people community in Southern Vietnam from the facets of settlement, cultural integration and contributions to the economy, as well as the policies of Nguyen Lords and Nguyen dynasty towards them; without an insight into the role of Hoa people in the establishment and development of commercial hubs in Southern Vietnam, especially the influences of those hubs to the Southern economy in the present period. Through sources from domestic and international scholars, especially important official historical records compiled by the Nguyen authorities in the 19th and 20th century, such as *Dai Nam thuc luc* (大南寔錄, Veritable Records of the Great South), *Gia Dinh thanh thong chi* (嘉定城通志, Gazetteer of Gia Định Citadel), *Kham dinh Dai Nam hoi dien su le* (欽定大南會典事例, Royal compilation on Historical Facts and Events in Đại Nam), *Dai Nam chinh bien liet truyen* (大南正編列傳, Official Compilation of Đại Nam's History) *Phu bien tap luc* (*Miscellaneous Chronicles of the Pacified Frontier*) etc., as well as specialized and inter-disciplinary research methods, the articles aims to complement the findings of those scholars by giving a more comprehensive and profound perspective on the role of Hoa people in the establishment and development of four commercial hubs in Southern Vietnam in the 17th-19th century.

II. The settlement process of Hoa people in Southern Vietnam (17th to 19th century)

Due to many social turmoils, many communities (including Chinese ones) from elsewhere came to Southern Vietnam and settled there during many historical periods. According to the records of Trinh Hoai Duc in *Gia Dinh thanh thong chi*, in 1679, two generals of the Ming dynasty (China), Duong Ngan Dich (Yang Yandi-楊彥迪) Guangdong Chief Commander and Tran Thuong Xuyen (Chen Shangchuan - 陳上川), who refused to surrender to the Qing dynasty, along with their lieutenants led 3,000 soldiers and their families on 50 boats to travel to Tu Dung estuary (Da Nang) to request an audience with Lord Nguyen Phuc Tan for their asylum in Vietnam. This Chinese population was allowed by the Nguyen lord to settle in provinces of Southern Vietnam in order to exploit the area and help him expand the country to the south: "Soldiers of General Yang (Duong Ngan Dich) quickly took the boats through Xoai Rap estuary, Dai estuary and Tieu estuary (in the town of Dinh Tuong) and stopped at My Tho (the center of Dinh Tuong). Soldiers of General Chen sailed through Can Gio estuary and then stationed in Ban Lan district of Dong Nai (Bien Hoa), etc." (Trinh Hoai Duc, 2005, p. 110).

Also around this time, Mac Cuu (Mo Jiu - 鄭玖), a Guangdong (China) native led a group of Hoa people to the land of Ha Tien⁷ to settle down. *Gia Dinh thanh thong chi* wrote about this as follows: Ha Tien, also Muong Kham, is called Feng Cheng in Chinese. At first, there was a man named Mac Cuu, a native from Liguu commune, Haikang county, Leizhou city, Guangdong province. In the time of the Great Qing dynasty (1680), the Ming dynasty was completely collapsed (but it was not until the 19th year of Kangxi's reign was Guangdong area pacified). Mac Cuu refused the early policies of the Qing dynasty, and thus fled to the South. He saw that in Sai Mat city, Vietnamese people, Chinese people, Cambodian people, and Javanese people opened gamble houses to collect toll tax. He then tendered to buy that tax, and after that discovered a silver mine, thus became rich. He then gathered Vietnamese people who were scattering in Phu Quoc, Can Bot (Can Vot - Kampot), Huong Uc (Vung Thom - Kompong Som), Gia Khe (Rach Gia), Ca Mau, etc. to establish seven communes and villages. Legend has it that immortal beings often appear on the river here, so the land was name Ha Tien (lit.: Immortals on the river) (Trinh Hoai Duc, 2005, p. 159).

Mac Cuu established Ha Tien town to attract wandering people or those who were expelled, mainly from provinces of Quang Nam, Quang Ngai (in the central region of Vietnam), and also Cham people to come here to reclaim the land and make their living. From that, Ha Tien commercial port was built, where sailing ships from everywhere "are so many it's unable to count the number of masts" and contribute to the busy trade here (Trinh Hoai Duc, 2005, p. 246). The prosperity of Ha Tien at that time constantly caught the attention of the Siamese (Thailand). Realizing the need for a force strong enough to protect his territory, in 1708, Mac Cuu wrote a letter to offer the land of Ha Tien to the Nguyen lord. The lord then appointed Mac Cuu the position of Chief Commander and entrusted him to govern Ha Tien (Quoc su quan trieu Nguyen - National Historical Archive Department of Nguyen Dynasty, 2007, p.122). In 1735 Mac Cuu passed away. His eldest son, Mac Thien Tu (Mo Tianci - 鄭天賜) succeeded and was appointed Ha Tien governor with special power to protect the border land.

In later stages, the number of Hoa people migrating to Southern Vietnam constantly increased, especially when social turmoils were seen in China or places where they lived. Through many historical events, during the process of migration and settlement, the Chinese community has made important contributions to the reclamation and especially the building of famous commercial hubs, contributing to socioeconomic development of Southern Vietnam and laying the foundation for the developed commodity economy later on.

III. The role of Hoa people in the establishment and development of commercial centers in Southern Vietnam

⁷ This land is now Ha Tien City of Kien Giang province (in Southern Vietnam).

At the end of the 17th century, while most Vietnamese people still focused on the traditional agricultural production, most Chinese people, as they came to Southern Vietnam, with their certain advantage in trading and the favorable conditions of the area, engaged in making handicrafts and commercial activities as their livelihood. Trinh Hoai Duc in *Gia Dinh thanh thong chi* stated: “Vietnam’s Gia Dinh land is full of rice and fish, and no one is worried about hunger” (Trinh Hoai Duc 1999, 141, 160). A quite interesting thing is that wherever Hoa people live, there will be busy cities with bustling economic activities; wherever there are coins and money, there will be Hoa people (Le Thuy Hong Yen, 2013, pp.152-153). Between the 17th and the 19th century, four commercial hubs were built in Southern Vietnam, whose establishment and development were closely associated with the role of Chinese people: Nong Nai Dai Pho; My Tho City; Ha Tien commercial port; Cho Lon.

Nong Nai Dai Pho

The old Nong Nai Dai Pho today is Cu Lao Pho of Hiep Hoa Commune, Bien Hoa City, Dong Nai Province (in the Southern region). This is an islet located between two branches of river with a favorable position for waterway traffic. This area used to be an "intermediary" between the lower and the upper Dong Nai river - formerly known as Phuoc Long Giang.

In 1679, with the approval of Nguyen lord, a group of Chinese led by Tran Thuong Xuyen crossed Can Gio estuary to settle down in Ban Lan (Bien Hoa). As they arrived, they soon discovered the advantages of Nong Nai Dai Pho and gathered many Chinese merchants to live and trade here. Despite being far from the sea, Nong Nai Dai Pho had a deep river running through, so it's possible to go up to the North to exploit forestry products as well as go down to the South to Can Gio estuary, and even to Cambodia. With their capital and accumulated experience, plus the preferential policies of Nguyen lords, Chinese settlers quickly proceeded to reclaiming the land, building houses and wharves, expanding roads and building markets.

With diligent will and efforts to grow from small businesses to bigger ones, from being employees to being employers, from being small bosses to being big ones, together with the acumen in understanding characteristics of local residents and markets as well as advantages of each region to have appropriate business plans, after just a few decades, by the beginning of the 18th century, Chinese immigrants turned Nong Nai Dai Pho into the most bustling commercial port in Southern Vietnam, attracting many merchant ships from Japan, China and Western countries to come here to trade and exchange goods. History talked about the bustle and spaciousness of Nong Nai Dai Pho as follows: “At the western end is Dai Pho. In its early days, Tran Thuong Xuyen gathered Chinese merchants to build streets, houses with tiled roofs and lime-plastered walls, towering pavilions, multi-floor shops that shine brightly under the sunlight. Every five miles there are three stripes of street. Big streets are paved with white stone, horizontal streets with laterite, and small streets with green stone, which are very flat. Merchants gather in crowds; ships and boats, both large and small, park close to each other. It is truly a bustling place. Big and rich traders account for the most here” (Trinh Hoai Duc, 2005, p.238).

In this period, merchants came to Nong Nai Dai Pho not only for trading, but also for leisure and entertainment during the purchasing period. “Merchants drop the anchors of their ships, then go on land to rent an accommodation, then visit dealers to purchase goods, check the goods on the ship and load them on, and negotiate the price. The vendors set the price, and all types of goods are traded. On the day for the ship to return, if the ship owner has something he wants to buy, the dealer will help him buy and deliver it before the deadline. The dealer and the merchant calculate the bill, then together go to enjoy themselves. So they have fresh water to bathe in and don't have to worry about barnacles accumulating on the hull of their ships. When they return, the ships are also filled with other goods. How convenient it is.” (Phan Khoang, 1969, p. 412).

The items exchanged here are also very diverse, the purchase and sale are also easy without any obstacles: “The products that merchant ships often buy are those produced in Dong Nai, such as rice, dried fish, rhino horns, ivories, antlers, and southern herbs. On the other hand, dealers often buy consumer products, from silk, burlap and medicines to luxury and decorative goods such as tiles, porcelains, stone for pagoda pillars, incense, joss paper, etc. (Diep Dinh Hoa, Phan Dinh Dung, 1998, p. 128). Nong Nai Dai Pho became a place where “ships and boats of Chinese people, Western people, Japanese people and Javanese people gather, and the Chinese style gradually spread to every corner of Dong Pho” (Huynh Van Toi, Phan Dinh Dung, 2005, p. 89).

From its establishment and development to its destruction, Nong Nai Dai Pho existed for 97 years (1679 - 1776) and was associated with the merits of Trần Thượng Xuyên (Chen Shangchuan) as well as Chinese immigrants. Its prosperity made a great echo in the history of Southern Vietnam back then. However, the prosperity of Nong Nai Dai Pho only lasted until the first half of the 18th century, then declined due to many reasons, mainly the devastation of the war between the Tay Son dynasty and Nguyen Anh. Regarding this event, *Gia Dinh thanh thong chi* wrote: “After 1776, the Tay Son government sent troops to occupy the land. They tore down buildings to take bricks, stone and wealth to bring back to Quy Nhon. The land became desolated. After the birth of the Nguyen dynasty, some people returned to the land, but it could not be restored to even one percent of its old days”. (Trinh Hoai Duc, 2005, p. 238)

My Tho Dai Pho

My Tho Dai Pho was also established around the same time as Nong Nai Dai Pho. In 1679, a group of about 1,500 Hoa people were allowed by Nguyen lord to settle in this new land. Among the group, there was a man named Duong Ngan Dich, who established My Tho Dai Pho along the left branch of My Tho canal, starting from Tam Ngua (Horse-Bathing) wharf, at the intersection between My Tho canal and Tien river⁸. With a favorable position for trade due to its location at the river junction, Hoa people who came here to live mainly made their living by trading and manufacturing

⁸ This area now belongs to Ward 2, My Tho City, Tien Giang Province.

traditional medicine, as well as making handicrafts. Simultaneously with the long tradition of trade, Hoa people in My Tho Dai Pho "reclaimed the land and built the streets", attracted traders from many places and made important contributions in building the foundation for exploiting this land. By the second half of the 17th century, My Tho Dai Pho became one of the two biggest commercial hubs in the South at that time.

Domestic and foreign trade activities in My Tho Dai Pho were very active. From there, merchant ships could go up the Tien River to the west to Cai Lay and Cai Be (Tien Giang) and further to Cambodia; or go down the stream to the east to Cho Gao, Go Cong and to Tieu estuary, then to Sai Gon or Phu Xuan - Hue; or sail along Bao Dinh channel through Vam Co Tay river and Ben Luc (Long An) to Sai Gon. In addition, My Tho was also a commercial port with trade relations with foreign countries, attracting merchant ships from other countries to visit and exchange goods. History told about the prosperity of My Tho as follows: "To the south of the governing office is My Tho great street market. It has houses with tiled roof and engraved columns, large pagodas, as well as ships and boats from rivers and the sea. The place is a very prosperous and boisterous city - merchant ships from everywhere must rest on My Tho river to see the moon and wait for the water to rise, then decide to go upstream to the west or downstream to the east" (Quoc su quan trieu Nguyen (National History Bureau of the Nguyen Dynasty), 2007, p. 451). After more than 100 years of bustling activities, in 1781, My Tho Dai Pho had had strong development, both as a prominent economic and commercial hub and a political and administrative center of Tran Dinh town in particular and of the entire Mekong Delta in general (Fujiwara Riichiro, 1974, p. 144). Not only being an administrative center, My Tho Dai Pho was also an economic-commercial hub as well as an important transshipment area between provinces in the Mekong Delta and Sai Gon - Cho Lon.

However, in a turbulent historical period of the Southern region, My Tho Dai Pho was also heavily affected by the struggle for power and annexation between forces. There was a dispute among the Chinese community here, which led to the rebel of Huang Jin - lieutenant of Yang Yandi against the general himself and ended with the death of Yang. At the same time, My Tho Dai Pho was also devastated when the Tay Son army attacked. In 1785, My Tho Dai Pho was swept over and destroyed by Siamese army of Thailand.

Ha Tien Commercial Port

Mac Cuu (1655-1735), was a native of Liguu commune, Haikang county, Leizhou city, Guangdong province. He was a dynamic trader who often traveled on sea routes from China to the Philippines and Indonesia, and worked closely with Zheng Chenggong in Taiwan in the struggle against the Qing dynasty. In 1680, Mac Cuu brought his family and trusted people on boats to leave Fujian (Trinh Hoai Duc, 2005, p. 79). With his experience from the time of being a trader, after arriving in Ha Tien, the first thing that Mo Jiu did was to open opium dens, tender for the collection of toll tax from large casinos to get rich. At the same time, he embarked on the development of business, especially

trading with foreign countries, expanding marketplaces and building strongholds. Many documents prove that Mac Cuu called for and received merchant ships from other countries to come for trading, and also actively set up trade relations with Japan and China. (Tan Viet Dieu, 1961. p. 554). In order to encourage foreign merchant ships to visit, Mac Cuu implemented a rather preferential commodity tax policy. Accordingly, merchandises are only subjected to a small tax. Thanks to this, Ha Tien soon became a fairly busy commercial port with the presence of many merchant ships from different countries.

Under the threat of the Siamese army and the weakness of Chenla, Mac Cuu needed help to preserve his fortune. In 1708, Mac Cuu contacted Lord Nguyen Phuc Chu and offered him Ha Tien. The Nguyen lord accepted the land and appointed Mo Jiu as Chief Commander of Ha Tien town, with the title of Marquess Cuu Ngoc. This event was recorded in history as follows: “In the year of the Rat, or 1708, on August 1, Mạc Cửu was appointed Chief Commander of Ha Tien town... Legend has it that the land often saw immortal beings appear on the river, thus it was named Ha Tien. Mac Cuu authorized his subordinates, Zhang Qiu and Li She, to present a letter asking to be the chief of Ha Tien. The lord agreed and appointed him Chief Commander. Mo Jiu built a mansion in Phuong Thanh. More and more people then came to the land.” (Trinh Hoai Duc, 2005, p. 159).

In 1735, Mac Cuu passed away. His son, Mac Thien Tu succeeded his father as Commander of Ha Tien town. At that time, Ha Tien had become prosperous, so the Nguyen lord gave Mac Thien Tu more powers. “[He was] given three "Long Bai" boats and exempted from boat tax. Every year, the boats must go abroad to buy precious items for the royal court. [The lord also allowed him to] open a mint” (Trinh Hoai Duc, 2005, p. 160). Inheriting his father's career, Mac Thien Tu constructed public buildings and strongholds, formed troops, expanded streets and markets, promoted trade with foreign countries, attracted more and more foreign boats and ships (Anh Nguyen, 1957, p. 1033). In parallel with the expansion of trade with other countries, Mac Thien Tu also planned for the construction of street market, roads, mansions, temples, army camps, warehouses, workshops (for ship repair), strongholds, etc., thus further make Ha Tien commercial port more bustling with “adjacent roads and continuous streets. Vietnamese people, Chinese people, Cambodian people and Javanese people have their own living quarters, boats and ships come and go endlessly. What a grand place in the corner of the sea” (Cao Tu Thanh, 2004, p. 21).

It can be seen that Ha Tien commercial port had become an outstanding economic and cultural hub in the southern region. The Chinese community in Ha Tien was independent but not isolated or closed. In their development process, they gradually intergated into Vietnam in all aspects. Later, due to many historical incidents, Ha Tien commercial port also died down. Most of the Hoa people here were scattered to other places, many of them came to Cho Lon area to continue their business and develop foreign trade.

Cho Lon

Events of the Southern region in general, and of each locality such as Nong Nai Dai Pho, My Tho Dai Pho or Ha Tien commercial port caused these hubs to gradually lose their position. The Chinese community in these places was scattered and had to look for other places to live. After such events, a few of them returned; however, these places were no longer the same. History said that: Nong Nai "...became desolated. After the birth of the Nguyen dynasty, some people returned to the land, but it could not be restored to one percent (ten thousandth) of its old days" (Trinh Hoai Duc, 2005, p. 238). As for My Tho Dai Pho, "from 1788, residents gradually came back. The land flourished, but not as much as half of its old days" (Trinh Hoai Duc, 2005, p. 241).

The desolation of once-thriving locations created favorable conditions for Cho Lon to develop. From 1788,⁹ Cho Lon entered the period of construction and development, becoming a center of important role in the development plan of Nguyen lords for Southern Vietnam. Along with previously settled residents, Chinese immigrants from war-stricken areas came to Cho Lon to live and contribute to making this place a famous commercial hub. Cho Lon at that time was described as follows: "The streets are woven together in the form of the character 'field' ('tian' in Chinese), adjacent to each other. Vietnamese and Hoa people lived together along the length of 3 miles on these streets. Goods on display include: brocade, porcelains, paper, jewelry, books. There are also, drugstores, tea shops and noodles shops. Almost everything was available for sale on both the north and the south ends of the river. With people all around, this place was truly bustling... To the east of the main road was Binh An Market, where all kinds of valuable products from the mountain and the sea as well as local products were sold. At night, the market was lit with many lights to create conditions for transaction activities" (Trinh Hoai Duc, 2005, p. 229). Later, Cho Lon also developed other economic sectors in which the Chinese played a major role: "all commercial activities of the region and almost the entire lower region of the South were concentrated here, which the Hoa people seized and possibly monopolized" (Ngo Ai Long, 1998, p. 14).

Since the late 18th century, Cho Lon became a wholesale area for the supply of goods, where most of major merchants were Chinese. Hoa people in Cho Lon previously set up their societies and associations to manage the trade and support each other in the settlement process in this area. The Minh Huong people here mainly provided milling services, export of rice and other agricultural products, and provided supplies to the Mekong Delta. On the map of Sai Gon City in 1795, the area of Cho Lon was called Bazar Chinois (Chinese market, or Pho Khach). In addition to trading rice and other agricultural products, Chinese merchants here also controlled the distribution of daily necessities delivered from China, Southeast Asian countries and Europe. Before the French began to establish colony in Southern Vietnam (in 1867), Cho Lon had already had 500 houses, 2 canals, 5 bridges, many warehouses and shipyards, most of them were owned by Chinese people. Their trade there bustled day and night (Trinh Hoai Duc, 2005, p. 229). In 1822, Finlayson, a British diplomat in Sai Gon commented that: each of the two towns of

⁹ Cho Lon was 5 km to the southwest of Sai Gon, and was established by Hoa people in 1778. Cho Lon was often called the market of Chinese people, and was known by people at that time as Sai Gon market.

Ben Nghe (later Sai Gon) and Sai Gon (later Cho Lon) is as big as Bangkok - the capital of Siam. He described as follows: "Houses are large and are suitable to the land. The roofs are tiled, with wooden columns. The walls are made from clay and bamboo frames, then plastered. Many tall buildings with wooden floor line up along the canal, the river bank or the wide main street. The streets are more neatly arranged compared to many cities in Europe." (Nguyen Van Huy, 1973, p. 214). In *Gia Dinh thanh thong chi*, Trinh Hoai Duc described the economic activities in Southern Vietnam at that time as follows: with the active role of Chinese people, the land quickly became a dynamic economic area, with the flourishing of commercial operations, playing an important role in the sustainable development of Vietnam in history as well as today "[...] Goods on display on the streets include: brocade, paper, porcelain, jewelry, books, medicines, tea... The goods are transported via waterway or by sea, and are very diverse..." (Trinh Hoai Duc, 2005, p.410).

When the French colonial empire invaded Southern Vietnam and began to rule here, the structure and organization of Chinese community in Cho Lon was also changed. After occupying Vietnam (in 1884), for the sake of maintaining good diplomatic relation with China, the French colonial government recognized the Hoa people living in Vietnam as Chinese citizens, confirmed the equality between Hoa people and Vietnamese people in many aspects, in terms of both life and properties, and allowed Hoa people to freely travel and form business establishments across the southern territory. In Cho Lon, Chinese residents of each street were entitled to establish an association to manage their internal affairs (Nguyen Cam Thuy (chief author), 2000, p. 23).

IV. Conclusion

During the 17th century, as Nguyen lords were in need of labor for reclamation, they quickly accepted the Chinese migrating to Vietnam, and arranged for them to reclaim the Southern region. After some time of settlement in the new land (Southern Vietnam), with their previous trading experience, these Chinese immigrants quickly expanded commercial activities. The presence of Hoa people in Southern Vietnam for centuries (especially from the 17th to the 19th century) left significant imprints with bustling cities. While Nong Nai Dai Pho became a busy trading port, with bustling commercial operations in the Southeastern region, My Tho Dai Pho also developed into one of the hubs to coordinate commercial operations in the Southwestern region, contributing to lead the agriculture in the South towards community economy from very early. By the 19th century, although Nong Nai Dai Pho, My Tho Dai Pho and Ha Tien commercial port lost their former positions due to many reasons, and Cho Lon gradually replaced them as an important commercial hub in the region, these cities still acted as intermediate centers for goods and commodities to be gathered for Cho Lon and then sold outward. It was such commercial activities that made it possible for agricultural products of Southern Vietnam to reach other countries through the commercial ports established by Hoa people in the southern land. The development of foreign

trade activities helped the Southern region to develop the commodity economy with early capitalistic elements from the second half of the 17th century to the early 19th century, which contributed greatly to the development of Vietnam's economy.

The establishment of commercial hubs in the South in association with Chinese community is a positive factor for the development of commodity economy in this land. Today, there are not many traces of commercial hubs such as Nong Nai Dai Pho (Dong Nai), My Tho Dai Pho (Tien Giang), Ha Tien commercial port (Kien Giang) left. However, with their development in history, these hub laid the foundation for economic development in each locality as well as for the entire Southern region. In particular, Cho Lon to date is still considered one of the most prosperous commercial hubs of not only Hoa people but also Vietnamese people; at the same time, it is also an indispensable economic hub of the so-called most dynamic city in Vietnam today.

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