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## CHOLON: A "LITTLE CHINA" IN THE HEART OF SAIGON

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For the traveler who arrives today in Ho Chi Minh City, "Cholon" mostly evokes one of the neighborhoods of the city, roughly corresponding to the fifth district (quận 5) adjacent to the central districts. This apparent banality, however, masks the extraordinary destiny of what was for a long time a city in its own right.

Its birth goes back to 1779, when a group of Chinese of Biên Hòa (a city located in the north of current Ho Chi Minh City) had to flee the attacks of the Tây Sơn rebels fighting the Nguyễn, the lords of the South. Its emergence at the end of the 18th century is linked to the revolt of the Tay Son in fight against Nguyen. These, lords of the South, shared the Vietnamese territory with the Trịnh, lords of the North, each of the two families claiming to reign in the name of the emperor Le and in respect of the suzerainty of China over the country. It was in this troubled context that a group of Chinese from Biên Hòa (a locality north of today's Ho Chi Minh City) had to flee rebel attacks in 1779.

They took refuge on the edge of a watercourse (the future "Chinese arroyo") located not far from a small Vietnamese city named Saigon (from the eponymous of the river *Sài Gòn*) and founded there a village that would become Cholon (*Chợ Lớn*, meaning in Vietnamese "the big market"). Saigon and Cholon will henceforth know two parallel destinies. The French moving in from 1859 will promote the progressive networking of the two cities through the construction of two roads and a tram line while the banks of the river were laid out. Cholon will keep its autonomy for a long time until the creation in 1931 of a unique urban entity called "Saigon-Cholon", name which will be simplified to "Saigon" in 1956. The two cities were united administratively, but this integration did not make the ethnic and cultural particularities of Cholon disappear.

### A city built by Chinese

We cannot talk about Cholon without going back to the history of Vietnamese Chinese (*Hoa*) whose number has gradually increased due to migrations related to political crisis in China. The first major immigration to Cochinchina took place following the fall of the Ming Dynasty in 1644 and the coming to power of the Qing.

To ensure their power, the latter had to repress several revolts in the years that followed, causing the exile of thousands of soldiers, mandarins, scholars, Buddhist monks, remained faithful to the old dynasty. Among them, a group of 3,000 men under the direction of two Chinese generals, Dương Ngạn Địch (Yang Yandi, 楊彥迪) and Trần Thượng Xuyên (Chen Shangchuan, 陳上川), proposed in 1679 his services to the Vietnamese king Nguyễn Phúc Tần living in Huế. The king asked them to settle in Cochinchina which then belonged to the Khmer kingdom in order to strengthen his influence. They founded several villages, including the one of Biên Hòa, and made a decisive contribution to the development of agriculture, especially rice growing.

Later, the Taiping revolt (1851-1864) provoked the arrival of new refugees who increased the number of Chinese people in Cochinchina. When they arrived in 1859, the French found this Chinese community firmly established in Cholon. They understood the interest of the collaboration with the Chinese and organized the community into five congregations, each corresponding to a specific geodialectal group. They let the Chinese manage themselves, especially regarding collective properties (hospitals, cemeteries, schools). Colonial authorities, for their part, dealt with the various economic, legal and fiscal matters directly with the representatives of the community. This organization allowed Hoa to maintain their specificity and, in this very favorable context, to fully develop their various economic activities. The end of colonization and the emergence of South Vietnam did not fundamentally change their situation. Despite pressure from the Saigon government to "Vietnamise" them, they managed to maintain their autonomy, also strengthening their grip on the South Vietnamese economy. However, the defeat of 1975 and the reunification of Vietnam under the aegis of Hanoi radically changed the situation. Considered unassimilable in the new socialist Vietnam, the Hoa were subjected to repeated pressure until the crisis of 1978 which drove them to flee the country, most of them as boat people and in often terrible conditions. If the exact number of these refugees is not known, it is generally considered that they were at least 500,000. Most of them found refuge in Australia, Europe and North America. In 1986, the Vietnamese authorities initiated a policy of renewal (*Chính sách Đổi Mới*) to encourage investments by Vietnamese living abroad (*Việt kiều*) among which the Hoa. Prudent at first, they started investing again in Vietnam while keeping a margin of safety in their host countries.

### A major economic center

For two centuries, Cholon distinguished itself by its economic role, perceptible even in its name, *Chợ Lớn*, meaning in Vietnamese "the big market". Activity of its inhabitants was essentially turned towards trading which grew because of several factors: arrival of the French, growth of the Chinese community, its internal solidarity and a favorable colonial regulation. The Hoa were very present in the agricultural sector, shipbuilding (junks), wood (sawmills, joinery ...), paper industry, textile, coal, metals (tin, aluminum, iron) and also in the craft industry. In addition, they exercised particular control over the rice sector. It was in Cholon that was sent most of the rice produced in Cochinchina. Thanks to a well-structured network, the Chinese controlled the entire production line with the exception of the crop itself, which was provided by Vietnamese peasants. The rice was directly purchased from producers by Chinese intermediaries, sent to Cholon, processed and stored by wholesalers before being shipped via the arroyo to Saigon port and then exported overseas. If the crisis of 1978 put an end to this intense activity, the policy of renewal of 1986 encouraged the Hoa to attempt a return to Vietnam. However, they had to adapt to a new economic context as well as a change in the ethnic configuration of Cholon, a part of the Chinese inhabitants having been replaced by Vietnamese. These obstacles have not prevented many of them from successfully developing new business.



The Chinese arroyo around 1910

source : virtual-saigon.net

There are still different places today that bear witness to this period. Two of them, the Bình Tây market and the Chinese arroyo, deserve special attention because they had very different fates. The big market Bình Tây was financed by a Chinese patron named Quách Đàm. Inaugurated in 1930, it has gone through all the vicissitudes of Vietnam's recent history without ever ceasing its activity. This vast square construction now has more than 2,300 stands largely held by Chinese traders and where are sold food, spices, textiles and other items. Very lively, the market remains, as in the colonial era, one of the important centers of economic activity of the district. The Chinese arroyo, for its part, was throughout the 20th century the umbilical cord connecting Cholon to Saigon. It was through this route that passed all commodities and merchandise traded in Cholon. This intense activity was marked by the presence of innumerable junks used as dwellings or intended for transport. On its banks, densely built, stood many warehouses, rice mills and various industrial buildings, witnesses of the economic vitality of this fluvial axis. However, the Hoa's departure in 1978, the development of the road network in the 2000s and the redevelopment of the riverbanks put an end to the economic role of the arroyo, which has now become a deserted water area with no precise urban function.



The Bình Tây market around the 1950s

source : virtual-saigon.net



The Binh Tây market in 2014  
© Laurent Gédéon



The Chinese arroyo's mouth in 1929  
source : virtual-saigon.net



The Chinese arroyo's mouth in 2014  
© Laurent Gédéon

### Cholon in colonial imaginary

Cholon's evocation awakens a sleepy imaginary referring to the long-standing French colonial presence in Indochina, more precisely in Saigon, long known as the "Pearl of the Far East". In this context, Cholon was perceived as "the Chinese city", a place of fun and pleasures where one would go to "slum it". The city was also carrying a promise of exoticism geared to China, a country geographically close but difficult to access and mysterious for many settlers and Vietnamese. Going to Cholon, allowed to "dream" of China through the Chinatown. From this bygone past, few names appeared that were long familiar to the French of the colony such as the casino "Le Grand Monde" or the cabarets "Arc-en-Ciel" and "Palais de Jade".



The street of Canton at about the 1910's  
source : virtual-saigon.net

### A specificity that remains

Cholon remains today a must-stop for tour operators in Saigon. The guides promise "an immersion in Chinatown" through a quick visit of the Binh Tây market and some temples. But the essence of the neighborhood is complex and cannot be apprehended so easily. Discreet because of past events, the Chinese nature of Cholon is nonetheless real. But to seize it, it is necessary to be tactful, to observe with attention the storefronts, to look for it at the bottom of the stalls or in narrow alleyways, to identify it in surnames some of which are only worn by the Sino-Vietnamese, to hear it in the Chinese songs that sometimes resound in the street or through snippets of conversation where Vietnamese is sometimes replaced by Cantonese. The visitor who will thus have the time to tame Cholon will be rewarded by human encounters and the discovery of unknown richness that will lead him to touch the soul of a unique city, at the crossroads of two cultures.

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**Key words**

*Chinese, Cholon, Hoa, Saigon, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam*

**Additional pictures**

Another view of the Chinese arroyo's mouth in 2014

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Small shops, Trần Hưng Đạo avenue, December 2014  
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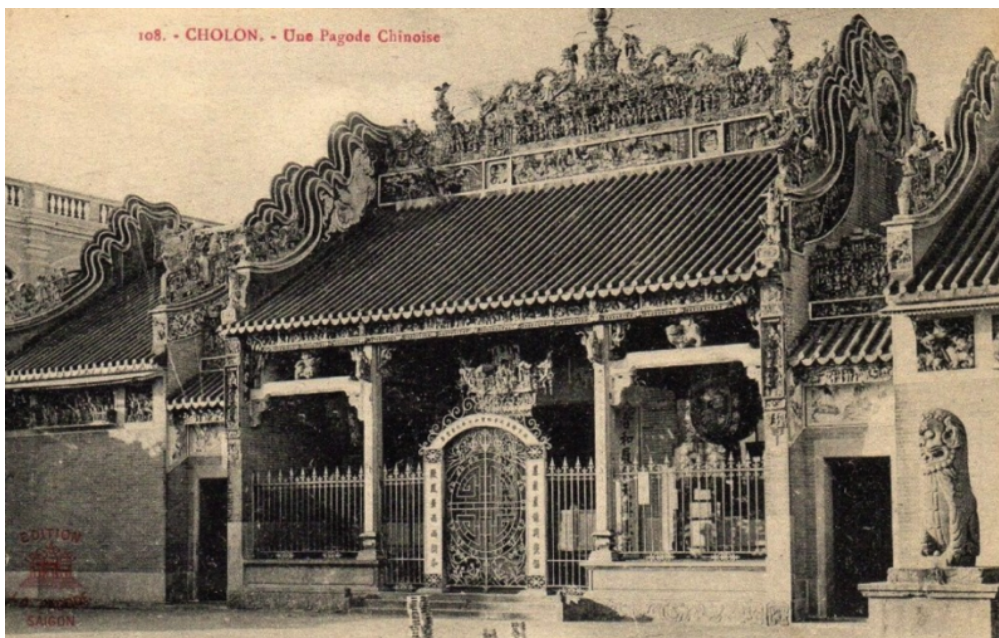
A narrow alleyway, Tống Duy Tân Street, December 2014  
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Small shops, Hồng Bàng Street, December 2014  
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Taoist pagoda of Bà Thiên Hậu, Nguyễn Trãi Street, December 2014  
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Taoist pagoda of Bà Thiên Hậu in the early 20th century  
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