

# Anti-Chinese press campaigns in French Indochina

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## 1. Introduction

In the early twentieth century, the middle-class Vietnamese elite sponsored massive anti-Chinese press campaigns in southern Vietnam. Literature exists on Vietnamese perceptions of the Chinese as well as alleged causes for their animosity; however, the role of the French in fostering this sentiment has not been studied in depth. This research specifically addresses how the creation of a Chinese enclave in Saigon known as Cholon, as well as French policies and urban planning within Cholon, contributed to anti-Chinese feelings. The research question is thus **“in what ways did French colonial urban planning and the creation of the large Chinese enclave of Cholon contribute to massive Vietnamese anti-Chinese press campaigns in Vietnam in the 1910s and 1920s?”**

## 2. Methodology

Collect and analyse relevant and valuable sources to create an annotated bibliography

Anti-Chinese press campaigns from the newspaper *La Tribune Indegène*

Secondary sources from uOttawa and Carleton libraries, as well as personal collections of professor Lessard

Primary sources and French colonial archives from  
*Bibliothèque nationale de France* online repository (Gallica)



## 3. Historical context

The Nguyen Dynasty

Prior to French colonisation of Vietnam, the Chinese had a strong influence throughout the region of Southeast Asia through the creation of a trade diaspora by about the 15<sup>th</sup> century. From the 18<sup>th</sup> century, sailors and merchants involved in this trade often settled in Vietnamese port cities, such as Saigon. The Nguyen Dynasty, Vietnam's last dynasty, created conditions for Chinese-driven economic development by enforcing assimilationist policies for Chinese settlers. This meant that the development of ethnic enclaves was prevented and the Chinese became a part of Vietnamese society.

By 1885, Vietnam became an addition to French Indochina. The northern and central territories, Tonkin and Annam, were protectorates, while the south, Cochinchina, became a colony directly ruled by the French. Under the French, Chinese immigration into the region continued and in fact accelerated to meet increasing labour demands for French Indochina's plantation economy. The French administration chose to end the Nguyen Dynasty's assimilation policies for the Chinese. As a result, Chinese immigrants tended to settle with their ethnic group in enclaves. These were small communities within Saigon as well as the area of Cholon. The Chinese community gathered in tightly knit cliques and were perceived as wealthy commercial owners by the Vietnamese. As the French felt that they were the driving economic force in Indochina, the Chinese were given special treatment to further foster their economic growth.

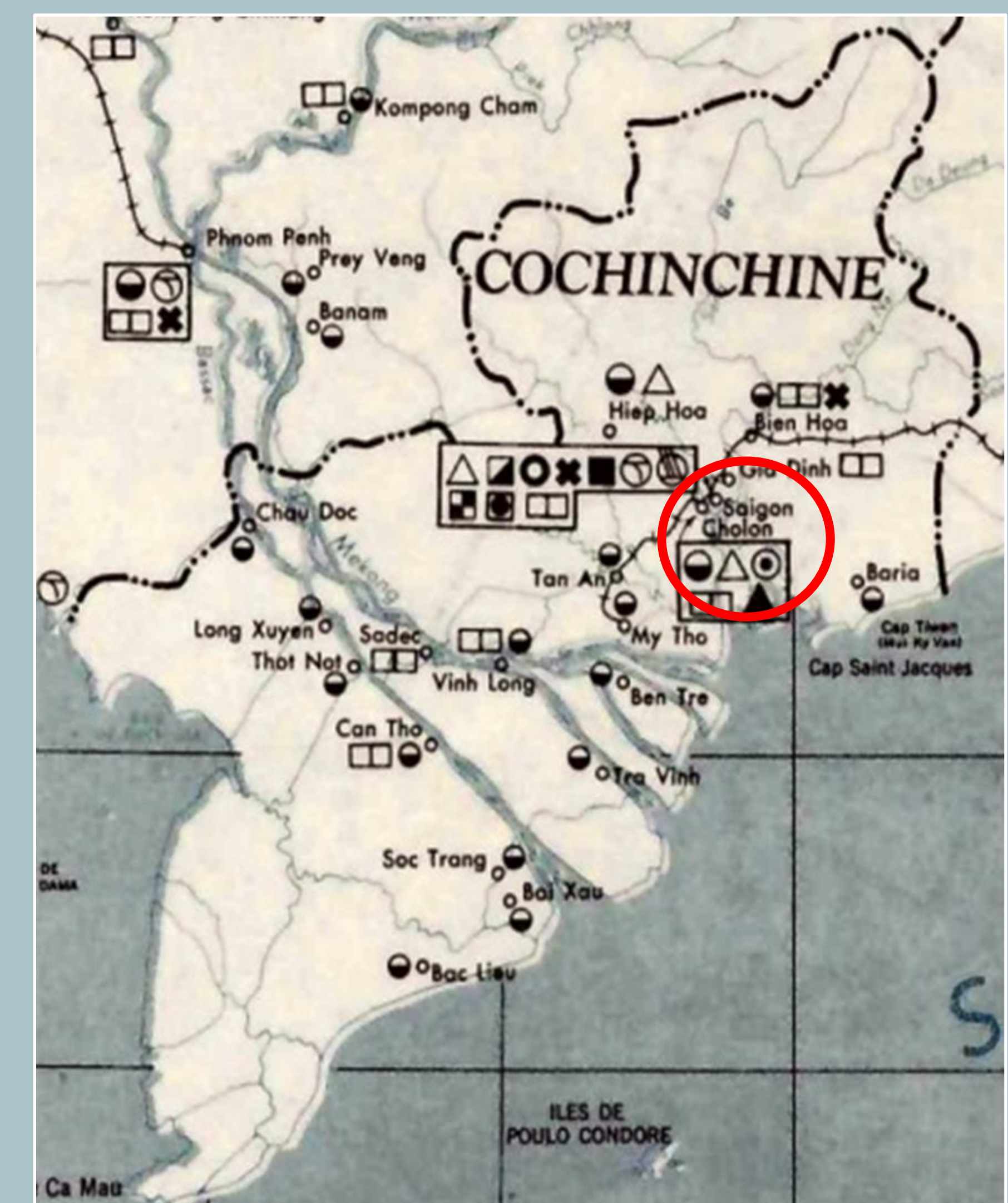
French Colonisation

Map of French Indochina



French Indochina consisted of Cambodia as a protectorate by 1867; Vietnam divided into three areas by 1885: Tonkin (North Vietnam) and Annam (Central Vietnam) as protectorates, and Cochinchina (South Vietnam) as a colony; and Laos as a protectorate by 1893.

Map of Cochinchina showing Cholon



This research focuses on Saigon's outlying town of Cholon, in which the Chinese immigrants began to heavily congregate under French rule.

Cholon and Saigon are circled in red in this map.

## 4. Conclusion

The research points to the fact that prior to French colonisation there had already been an influx of Chinese businessmen during the Nguyen dynasty; however, the Nguyen dynasty did their best to ensure that the Chinese population was assimilated. While the rationale for this had not been to prevent anti-Chinese sentiment but rather to maintain “Vietnameseness,” this meant that the Chinese were not blatantly set apart from the Vietnamese. The French administration, by contrast, favoured the Chinese in their economic policies as well as public policies and urban planning for racial and economic reasons. All the while the Vietnamese middle-class blamed the Chinese and did not see the French as to blame for their economic plights. The French did not see a need for assimilationist policies and so these came to an end. As a result, the Chinese congregated in tightly knit groups, such as in the large Chinese enclave of Cholon. Their seeming economic superiority became blaring to the Vietnamese, thus contributing to anti-Chinese sentiments.



*La Tribune indégène*, 25 November 1920.  
Caption: “Sus aux Chinois.”

## Acknowledgements:

This invaluable opportunity was made possible by the Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program (UROP) from the University of Ottawa. My thanks goes to Mme Pascale Lafrance for her role in enabling this opportunity to come to life, and to my UROP mentor Nina Baker for her support. A very special thanks to Professor Micheline Lessard for supervising and guiding me in this research.

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Maps from uOttawa Geographic, Statistical and Government Information Centre.



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