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Marginalizing Practices: Bureaucracy, Ethnography, and Becoming Chinese in Colonial Vietnam

This paper examines how French ethnographic and bureaucratic practices had the unintended effect of creating a particular cultural space occupied by the overseas Chinese (Hoa Kieu) in colonial Vietnam. Although the Chinese in Southeast Asia have often been associated with their economic hegemony in the region, Vietnam's geographical proximity and historical interaction with Mainland China adds to the distinctiveness of its Hoa community, as compared to those in other parts of Southeast Asia. While the Hoa had long differentiated themselves from the Vietnamese community, they came to occupy a clearly identifiable cultural space under French colonialism. French ethnography (that is to say their need to categorize and prescribe characteristics to ethnic groups that they encountered in Indochina) and the bureaucratic practices employed by the French in their administration of Indochina resulted in the emergence of cultural spaces, from which various ethnic groups were categorized coupled with bureaucratic practices that had the effect of prescribing characteristics to certain ethnic categorizations that were previously absent.

This paper focuses on French bureaucratic practices, including legal classifications under French colonialism, as it was prescribed to Cochinchina (as a colony), Tonkin and Annam (as protectorates) and Indochina as an entity; the practice of expulsions; identification cards/papers (e.g., visas, passports, cartes des sejours); and Chinese coolies. Such bureaucratic practices, combined with the ambiguity of such discourse that engulfed these practices, lead to the stringent dichotomy and marginalization of the Hoa thereby divorcing them from Vietnamese society. This discourse had centered on the socio-cultural, economic, diplomatic and political needs of the French in their rule over Indochina. The ambiguous legal position of the Chinese, coupled with French colonial theories and practices of territorial and citizenship closure, made it difficult, if not impossible, to treat the Chinese in the same manner as the indigenous or asiatique etrangers.

This paper, in particular, examines how these expulsion records reveal discourses on how to determine and measure the degree of assimilation that a Chinese had undergone, whether there are tangible identifiers of Chinese or Vietnamese characteristics, how the French categorized the Hoa apart from the Vietnamese, and, more importantly, how the Hoa defended their Vietnameseness in refuting grounds for expulsions. Whereas the psychology of self-identification and classification was based upon origin and dialect prior to French colonialism, the French system of institutionalized research and ethnography resulted in racial profiling. And while dialect

and origin may be altered or forgotten, one's racial composition became fixed and with it racial assumptions under the colonial state.

Classification of Vietnam's various ethnic groups, a result of French ethnography, and the French system of maintaining records that stemmed from classification had an adverse two-dimensional effect: in classifying ethnic groups to ensure control over the population, the system indulged in a discourse which solidified a sense of identity of themselves and of the other among these various groups. It is in this discourse, perpetuated through regulation of identification cards (for purposes of taxation, travel, migration, etc.) that ways of perceiving and discussing about multiple identities became tangible markers whether real or imagined.

By focusing on the socio-cultural repercussions of French ethnography and bureaucratic practices, this paper attempts to present a historical development of the Hoa in Vietnam that moves beyond the focus of economics/politics that is often associated with this particular group.

The paper will address the Overseas Chinese (Hoa) in colonial Vietnam from a non-economic, non geopolitical (Vietnam vis a vis mainland China), and non communist/nationalist historical perspective. Rather, it addresses the socio-cultural repercussions (e.g. ethnic & cultural classification) of French ethnography in Vietnam, and how this phenomenon resulted in the marginalization of the Hoa in relation to their Vietnamese counterparts. Marginalization was further perpetuated through French bureaucratic practices that had the unintended effects of outlining and prescribing (whether real or imagined) socio-cultural differences (e.g. physiognomy, cultural, behavioural, etc.). In examining documents relating to expulsions, passports/visas, and coolies, a discourse (by both the French and Hoa) on the Hoa in Vietnam emerges. And it is this discourse--this mode of thinking and discussing about the Hoa-- and its materialization through tangible bureaucratic practices, that marginalizes the Hoa from Vietnamese society during the colonial period. It is a history on the socio-cultural impact of ethnography and bureaucratic practices (rather than economic, nationalist, or communist history) that seeks to explain the marginalized position of the Hoa in colonial Vietnam.