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► **To cite this version:**

Vy Cao. Between the Sacred and the Secular: Publishing, Books, and Everyday Life in Colonial Cochinchina. Liam C. Kelley; Gerard Sasges. Vietnam Over the Long Twentieth Century. Becoming Modern, Going Global, Springer Nature Singapore, pp.85-100, 2024, Global Vietnam: Across Time, Space and Community, 978-981-97-3611-9. 10.1007/978-981-97-3611-9_5. halshs-04692914

HAL Id: halshs-04692914

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-04692914>

Submitted on 10 Sep 2024

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Chapter 5

Between the Sacred and the Secular: Publishing, Books, and Everyday Life in Colonial Cochinchina



Vy Cao

5.1 Introduction

In 1939, inhabitants of Sóc Trăng Province in the Mekong Delta could hear the following ditty (Lý 1939: 2):

*One for the cheap price,
Two for the peace of mind,
Three for the pleasure,
Four for the proximity and convenience!*¹

This poem was an advertisement spread by the local printing press Lý Công Quận, which offered cheap printing services for Vietnamese novels, catalogues, and religious texts. Lý Công Quận not an isolated phenomenon. Other presses that specialized in religious texts were located across Cochinchina: the Imprimerie Hậu Giang in Long Xuyên, the Imprimerie Phú Toàn in Vĩnh Long, and the Imprimerie du Mékong in Sa Đéc, to name just a few. What are we to make of this convergence of the “modern” print media with the “traditional”—in the form of religion and devotion?

The rise of the popular press transformed communication in Cochinchina in the late colonial period. Thanks to the proliferation of printing technology, advertising images and marketing slogans brought the idea of modernity into urban and rural areas. Embodied by French and local elites, modernity was also manifested through different objects and infrastructures, such as buildings, bridges, transportation systems, and daily items.

¹ The original text in Vietnamese is “Một là đặng giá rẻ; hai là đặng yên trí; ba là đặng vui lòng; bốn là đặng cận tiện.”.

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But far from being a homogeneous phenomenon, what was seen as modern was incessantly reappropriated and reinvented by different groups and individuals in their everyday life. When we define modernity as a desire to respond to singular aspirations, the concept becomes less a contradiction with traditional norms than a rational choice that resonates with the individual and their belief systems. Nor can we define modernity in simple economic terms. The expansion of the market economy can be a useful metric with which to analyze changes in social structures and practices, but this statement remains a hypothesis which requires solid data to be verified. In 1930s Cochinchina, new forms of investment encountered pre-existing practices of credit and trade. It is important to remember that the expansion of new economic models and practices do not necessarily lead to the same consequences everywhere and for everyone; nor do they obey a singular logic of development as individuals and institutions operate in different contexts.

This chapter begins with a quantitative study that traces the social and economic landscape of printing in Cochinchina in the late colonial period. The study is based on data collected from the Indochinese collection catalogue, which contains 12,270 bibliographic records of non-periodicals in *quốc ngữ*, the romanized script used to record vernacular Vietnamese, and its digitized documents. In complement to this catalogue, I also use the *Lists of Deposited Materials (Liste des imprimés déposés)*, published by the Directorate of Archives and Libraries in Hanoi from 1922 to 1944. Data from these catalogues were input into a database on Heurist, which is a free and open-source platform built by Dr. Ian Johnson, Artem Osmakov and the Arts eResearch team at the University of Sydney. Heurist possesses a mapping tool and a networks visualization feature, which in this research provides interesting insights on the spatial distribution of printing and publishing houses in Cochinchina. Besides bibliographic records, this database also contains information on individuals and organizations that participated in the book's industry.

After mapping the landscape of publishing in Cochinchina in the 1930s quantitatively, I then map it qualitatively. My approach consists of documenting and describing a specific type of action within a delimited population and geographical area. The action chosen for this study is the act of giving money to a printing house, individually or collectively, to publish books intended for free distribution. For my case study, I focus on the Imprimerie du Mékong, founded by Hồ Văn Sao in Sa Đéc around 1933.

Bringing the quantitative and qualitative approaches together sheds new light on the history of the publishing industry in colonial Indochina. While many histories of print media have focused on major cities like Saigon, Hanoi, or Hue, my study illustrates the broad reach of the printing industry and its presence across the Mekong Delta. It also shows the importance of religious publications for the growth of the publishing industry. While scholars frequently highlight print media as a vector of modernity, I argue it could just as easily serve to reinforce traditional beliefs and practices.

Moreover, attending to the materiality of the book and the meaning of its exchange provides a unique window into everyday life in Cochinchina. While it is commonplace to see the introduction of new technologies and the extension of market relationships as breaking down social ties, I argue that in colonial Cochinchina, the expansion and development of the publishing industry occurred alongside a diverse continuum of interpersonal exchanges among publishers, printers, merchants, peddlers, and readers. Rather than eroding social ties, publishing in the form of book donations served to link believers in practices of ritualized exchange based on shared cosmologies.

5.2 Approaches

Since the late colonial period, scholars have explored how print culture spread widely in Vietnamese urban areas, entering the daily life of local populations through the rapid expansion of newspapers, brochures, books, advertising posters, and ephemeral printed material. Already in 1942, Hoa Bằng—a pseudonym of the Vietnamese journalist and historian Hoàng Thúc Trâm—wrote on the history of publishing in Vietnam in terms of the shift from woodblock printing to modern typesetting and highlighted the transformative nature of that new technology (Hoa 1942). Huỳnh Văn Tông’s 1971 doctoral dissertation, *The History of Vietnamese Press from its Origins to 1930*, offers a complete introduction to archival sources and their use (Huỳnh 1971). He examined the favorable political and legislative conditions that contributed to the rise of the Vietnamese press, articulating a chronological and thematic evolution based on a rigorous analysis of Vietnamese newspapers and magazines.

In his influential *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial*, David Marr explored the relationships among economic development, media, and social and economic change under French colonial rule (Marr 1984). One of his main arguments concerned the modification of communal life and social bonds. According to Marr, the penetration of the cash economy into the countryside reinforced the notion of private property and transformed social relations. He observed that “traditional multiple and personal forms of socio-economic interactions were being replaced by the single, essentially impersonal commercial exchange system” (Marr 1984: 4). Although that may be intuitively persuasive, this chapter will demonstrate that Marr’s conclusion overstates the rate and degree of socio-economic change and fails to acknowledge how multiple forms of exchange existed simultaneously.

Other scholars have taken a different approach. Philippe Peycam’s (2012) detailed analysis of Saigon’s media in the 1920s and 1930s is framed in terms of the development of a vibrant public sphere despite colonial censorship and repression. While he echoes Marr’s concern with politics, he does enclose them in a strict dialectic. At the same time, he is concerned to re-evaluate the complex reality of colonial politics often characterized in terms of collaboration and resistance. Shawn McHale adopted an even more inclusive approach to his study of the Vietnamese press, exploring its integral role in the evolution of the Buddhist, Confucian, and Communist realms.

McHale in particular stressed the need not only to place printing and publishing in their economic, social, and political contexts, but also the need to “explore the world as viewed through such texts” (McHale 2004: 3).

Meanwhile, few scholars have considered an approach that attends to the materiality of printed matter, conditioned by a network of production and distribution, and how these aspects shaped the relationship of the local populations to reading and writing. According to Roger Chartier, “the printing press diffuses new objects, easily manipulated, carried on oneself or displayed, which gives the images and the texts a thicker presence, a more familiar reality” (1987: 7). Print culture can also be apprehended as the totality of new gestures generated by novel forms of images and textual production, so that it is no longer reduced to the sole practice of reading which, in Chartier words, “is a reading of today or of ancient scholars” (1987: 8). Although most studies on print culture focus on reading practices or the expansion of literacy, this chapter moves beyond the common assumption of a correlation between printed matter and literacy. As Chartier writes, “in the cities first, the massive appearance of new means of communication modifies practices—of devotion, of entertainment, of information, of knowledge—and redefines the relations men and women have with the sacred, powers, or their community” (1987: 7). This study thus adopts a hybrid approach, attending simultaneously to the socio-economic, to the material, to the spatial, and to the ideational, in order to shed new light on the history of publishing in Cochinchina in the late colonial period and its relationship to tradition and modernity.

5.3 Sources

The data in this research are collected from two main types of sources: first, the four volumes of the *Catalog of the Indochinese Collection 1922–1954* (Pasquel-Rageau 1988), which is an expanded and revised edition of the *Catalog of the Indochinese Collection of the National Library. Volume 1. Vietnamese Books Printed in Quốc Ngữ (1922–1954)* (Rageau 1979); second, the *List of Deposited Printed Works* (Boudet and Bourgeois 1922–1944), published by the Directorate of Archives and Libraries of Indochina.

The origins of the catalogues are to be found in the French system of the legal deposit. In France, the idea of a legal deposit originated during the reign of Francis I in the Montpellier order of December 28, 1537. As a kind of “safeguard of French thought,” the legal deposit assumed different roles and functions according to the political regime and historical context. It guaranteed a common intellectual and cultural heritage, helped to protect authors’ rights, and served as a means of control and surveillance (Dougnac and Guilbaud 1960; Koskas 2011).

The principle of the legal deposit was implemented across the five territories of Indochina beginning in 1922. According to the enacting legislation, which was based largely on French precedent, only printers were subject to the deposit obligation. They had to submit two copies of each publication to local government officials,

with one copy sent to the Central Library in Hanoi and the other copy forwarded to the National Library in Paris, where they arrived after a long administrative journey via both the Colonial and Interior ministries. In 1925, new legislation implemented the principle of a “double deposit,” which required both printers and publishers to additionally submit their works to an administrative unit. A final major modification of the Indochinese legal deposit occurred on January 9, 1945, when the number of examples was increased to eight and the definition of publishers was expanded to include “any person or legal person (printer, publisher, association, labor union, civil or commercial society, author who published their own work, or principal depositor of imported works, public administration), who sells, distributes, lends [printed materials].”

Responsibility for the legal deposit rested with the Indochinese Directorate of Archives and Libraries and its director, Paul Boudet, who headed the service for three decades (1917–1947). The directorate presided over a highly centralized system which depended on the presence of an efficient administrative network and a high level of coordination across the entire territory of Indochina to carry out its task of preserving and cataloguing all material published in the colony.

As the process of decolonization played out after 1945, the administration of the legal deposit became complicated. In Vietnam, the legal deposit now functioned under two different regimes. The operations of the legal deposit office, which was part of the Central Library in Hanoi, was disrupted by the Japanese military coup on March 9, 1945. Thus from 1945 to 1946, the Office of Legal Deposit in Hanoi only registered publications from Tonkin, that is, the north of Vietnam. In Saigon, the Cochinchina Regional Library was placed in the hands of Vietnamese authorities, with the result that the legal deposit system now functioned independently. In 1947, the Central Library and the Directorate of Archives and Libraries in Hanoi were placed under the authority of the High Commissioner of France based in Saigon. From 1947 to 1952, the High Commissioner continued to send the legal deposits of 1940–1944 to the National Library of France through the intermediary of the Ministry of the Interior. According to the register of printed matter of the National Library, the last shipment of deposits from Saigon to Paris occurred in 1950 and from Hanoi in August 1952. Additionally, after the Geneva Accords in 1954, the remaining collection of the Central Library in Hanoi was transferred to Saigon, consisting of 1000 containers of books including periodicals and documents from the archives.

Meanwhile, in Paris, the conservation of the Indochinese collection was shaped by history, institutions, and above all by the available linguistic and material resources. Between 1922 and 1934, the Indochinese legal deposits arrived directly at the National Library of France. They were registered at the Department of Printed Books, and then sorted according to topic. An Indochinese collection was created to gather all the printed materials in *quốc ngữ*. It was then classified according to the lists of the legal deposit published by the Directorate of Archives and Libraries in Hanoi. However, the bibliographic records were full of spelling mistakes and were often misinterpreted by the French librarians. Recognizing the problem, in 1934, the National Library agreed to transfer the collection to the School of Oriental

Languages. A Vietnamese assistant from the school was assigned to update the bibliographic records and register new arrivals. Unfortunately, the library had difficulty finding a person who could commit to this daunting task. From 1934 to 1952, the School of Oriental Languages only managed to classify 200 volumes out of 20,000, with the result that the bulk of the Indochinese collection remained inaccessible. Finally, in August 1952, all the Indochinese collection and deposits were returned to the National Library.

Today's Indochinese collection dates to the arrival of librarian Christiane Pasquel-Rageau in 1965. The first fruits of her effort to catalogue the Vietnamese collection is the *Catalogue of Printed Materials from the Indochinese Collection 1922–1954 Reproduced on Microfiches*, published in 1979, with 12,270 bibliographic records. From July 1986 to June 1988, the center for book conservation, the Department of Printed Books, and the Asia Service from the Department of Foreign Entries, decided to reproduce the entire Indochinese collection on microfiche. In this initiative, bibliographic data from the former catalogue were revised to prepare for the new *Indochinese Collection: Vietnamese Books Printed in Quốc-ngữ (1922–1954)*. Further, approximately 500 books from the Indochinese collection were added to the new version of the catalogue by Nguyễn Tất Đắc and Jean-Claude Poitelon. Nonetheless, it excluded publications recorded in the general catalogue and all the periodicals from the legal deposit. The new catalogue was published in four volumes in 1989, and all of its bibliographic records were added to the online catalogue of the National Library in 1997. Finally, beginning in 2020, a major collaboration between the national libraries in France and in Vietnam allowed for the digitization of the Indochinese collection. Thanks to these digitized documents, it is now possible to collect data and to analyze book production and circulation in Indochina during the early twentieth century.

5.4 Data

This section begins by tracing the publishing landscape of Indochina in general before moving on to focus on Cochinchina. This is the first time such a project of quantification and description has been attempted. The results allow us to explore data from locations where the legal deposit system functioned during the colonial period. In Cochinchina, this included Saigon and its surrounding neighborhoods such as Chợ Lớn, Đa Kao, Tân Định, Thủ Dầu Một, and Thủ Đức, as well as other provinces of the Mekong Delta.

The following chart, Fig. 5.1, shows the number of non-periodical deposits per printer or publisher in Indochina, from 1930 to 1944, including one publication in the French territory of Kouang-Tchéou-Wan (Guangzhouwan) in 1938.

According to the data, there were 257 printers and publishers in Indochina during this period and a total number of 12,305 deposits. Printing and publishing in Indochina varied greatly depending on the locality. In general, the number of deposits in Tonkin and Cochinchina far exceeded the rest of Indochina. In all cases,

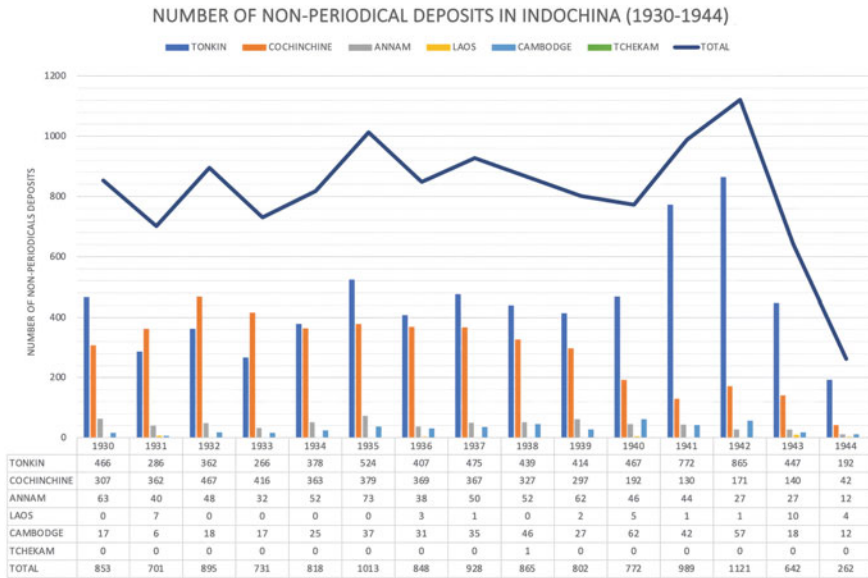


Fig. 5.1 Number of non-periodical deposits in the Indochinese Union (1930–1944). *Source* Author, based on Boudet and Bourgeois 1922–1944

the general curve decreased drastically for all the provinces from 1943 and reached its lowest point in 1944.

Contrary to the common assumption that Cochinchina was home to Indochina’s most dynamic publishing industry, the number of non-periodical deposits in Tonkin exceeded that of Cochinchina’s throughout this period. The gap between these two major urban poles began in 1930 and widened considerably in favor of Tonkin after 1934. Then, in contrast to the general evolution of Indochina, Tonkin’s publishing rates exploded from 1940 to 1942.

Outside of Tonkin and Cochinchina, Annam and Cambodia had similar rates of non-periodical deposits, whereas Laos saw the least deposits. In Annam, fifteen printing and publishing houses were recorded in Hue, Qui Nhon, and Vinh: A. J. S., Canh Tân, Đắc Lập, Imprimerie de la Mission de Hué, Imprimerie de la Mission de Qui Nhon, Imprimerie du Mirador (Viễn Đệ), Hương Giang, Phúc Long, Tiếng Dân, Tôn Thất Cảnh, Imprimerie de Qui Nhon, Châu Tinh, Imprimerie du Nord Annam, Nguyễn Đức Tư, and Vương Đình Châu. There were at least nine printing and publishing houses registered in Phnom Penh: Imprimerie Chong-hoa, Imprimerie de Nagaravatta, Imprimerie du Protectorat, Imprimerie Henry, Imprimerie Portail, Imprimerie Royale, Trường Xuân, and the Société d’Éditions Khmer. Notably, the Imprimerie de Nagaravatta, the publisher of *Nagaravatta* (1936–1942), the first Cambodian newspaper to be published in the Khmer language, appears in the legal deposits in 1939, 1941, and 1942.

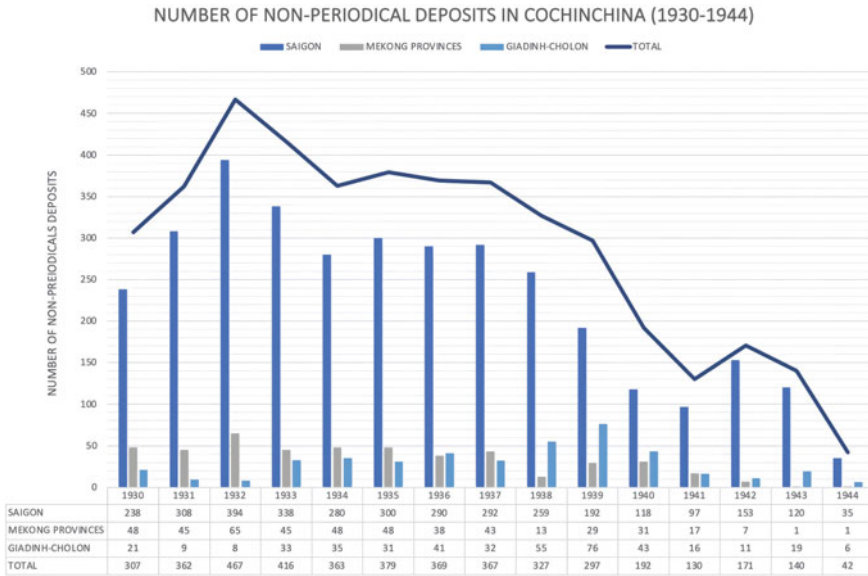


Fig. 5.2 Number of non-periodical deposits in Cochinchina (1930–1944). *Source* Author, based on Boudet and Bourgeois 1922–1944

Moving on to consider Cochinchina, although the number of deposits in Tonkin exceeded those in Cochinchina, printing and publishing activities in the Mekong Delta were more expansive and covered a wider geographical area. According to the data, there were 102 printing and publishing houses in Cochinchina and a total number of 4,329 publications between 1930 and 1944. See Fig. 5.2 for details.

As the statistics in Saigon greatly exceeded the ones in other areas, I have regrouped the data into three categories to get a better idea of their spatial distribution. The “Giadinh-Cholon” category includes districts or neighborhoods connected to Saigon such as Chợ Lớn, Đa Kao, Gia Định, Tân Định, Thủ Dầu Một, and Thủ Đức. The “Mekong provinces” category includes Bạc Liêu, Bến Tre, Cần Thơ, Gò Công, Long Xuyên, Mỹ Tho, Rạch Giá, Sa Đéc, Sóc Trăng, Trà Vinh, and Vĩnh Long.

Quantitatively, publishing in Cochinchina reached its peak in 1932. The following years witnessed a gradual decline until dropping sharply with the repression and arrest of Vietnamese journalists, writers, and anticolonial activists in 1938–1939. While non-periodical deposits in Saigon essentially ended with the appointment of the Vichyist government in 1942, publishing activities dropped off more gradually in the other Cochinchinese provinces. Beginning from 1944, the legal deposit system functioned only partially and with difficulty as communication between Saigon and the provinces faced difficulties due to military occupation and armed conflict.

5.5 Publishing as Practice

Many studies on Vietnamese modernity and the rise of printing have demonstrated the undeniable role of political and cultural associations (Brocheux and Hémary 1995; Marr 1984; Peycam 2012). However, few of them have documented the socio-economic conditions that allowed these activities to flourish, both inside and outside of the bourgeoisie and intellectual circles.

According to our data, printers, and publishers were mainly present in urban areas. These places possessed public facilities that allowed trading and economic development, such as buildings, routes, and financial infrastructures. Urban populations also constituted the main customer base for printing and publishing services, which ranged from printing catalogues and invitation cards to publishing popular Vietnamese plays and serialized novels.

Local elites embraced the idea of using modern printing technology to promote change and progress. Book manufacturers, bookstores, and publishing houses were often found near the headquarters of newspapers. For example, the *Imprimerie de l'Ouest* in Cần Thơ (also called “An-Hà” in Vietnamese) started as a daily newspaper and went on to become a major publishing hub in the Mekong Delta. From 1918 to 1952, the press published at least 152 non-periodicals. The same phenomenon was observed with *New Progress* (*Tân tiến*; 1935–1938), a weekly newspaper founded by local elites in Vĩnh Long and Sa Đéc. The Women’s Bookstore (Nữ lưu thơ quán) publisher in Gò Công is another example of a modernist publishing project. During its first months of activity, it printed books and novels in partnership with another publisher Bảo Tồn in Saigon, which was owned by Diệp Văn Kỳ’s spouse, Lê Thị Hạnh. After a short period living in France and supporting to the Constitutionalist Party of Bùi Quang Chiêu, Diệp Văn Kỳ advocated for freedom of speech and expression in Cochinchina. Diệp Văn Kỳ also owned important newspapers such as the *Indochina Times* (*Đông Pháp thời báo*; 1927–1928) and the *Morning Bell* (*Thần chung*; 1929), and collaborated with well-known activists and journalists Đào Trinh Nhất, Phan Khôi, Tân Đà Nguyễn Khắc Hiếu, Phan Văn Hùm, etc.

Throughout the early twentieth century, the rise of print culture transformed literary products into consumer items. Most printing houses in Cochinchina published novels, poems, and other literary pieces to satisfy a growing literate population. In response to this new market, publishers sought to purchase their own printing presses and other publishing technologies to reduce their dependence on presses and lower their production costs. While personal relationships might be enough to start a bookstore or even a publishing label, after a certain period, publishers often tried to acquire their own printing presses.

This tendency was even more obvious in the case of publishing houses owned by merchants who engaged in other trading activities alongside their activity as publishers. The pharmacist was an emblematic figure of a printer who also excelled as a merchant. One of the most successful book sellers in the Mekong Delta was run by a merchant and pharmaceutical retailer—François Võ Văn Vân, who owned a publishing house in Bến Tre province from 1929 to 1936. For publishers like these,

printed materials served both as a medium and a vector for commercial activities. On the one hand, books became consumer goods that could generate profits; on the other hand, people who owned the means to print books and other materials could easily advertise for their own businesses.

Advertising slogans and marketing strategies flourished side by side with the expanding market for published materials. Through mercantile and trading dynamics, print culture allowed the expression of ordinary discourses and one on one communication. For the first time in Cochinchina, visual items and written discourses were situated and embodied by networks of local merchants, pharmacists, small shopkeepers, craftsmen, and women from various backgrounds. Daily life became saturated with thousands of images and textual objects; social life in communities and villages became more visible and denser with the rise of print culture.

5.6 Between Commerce and Devotion

Buddhist temples, pagodas, and other religious institutions were also important actors in the book industry. Buddhist sutras and prayer books occupied an important proportion of the non-periodicals registered in the Indochinese collection. Many printers in Cochinchina specialized in publishing religious books. This was the case, for example, with the Imprimerie Hậu Giang in Long Xuyên (1931–1940), the Imprimerie Phú Toàn in Vĩnh Long (1929–1938), and the Imprimerie du Mékong in Sa Đéc (1933–1942). Book donation to temples, pagodas, and local communities, was a direct consequence of print culture. The growing number of local printers and easier access to printing services were a result of technical and economic modernization. Investigating book donations offers new insights into the socio-economic models of printing. It also sheds light on the continuous importance of communal bonds and the role religious organizations played in structuring life in Cochinchina.

Religious books and booklets are usually small and fragile objects. Their format varied from “in-octavo” to “in-16,” and often contained twelve to twenty-four pages. Although this does not reveal their actual size, which depends on the type of paper used by the printer, it indicates their specificity in comparison to other religious or literary collections. Religious books and booklets printed for free distributions were not necessarily destined for reading practices. Book donation reflects an economy of virtuous deeds and good karma. Books were instead a type of symbolic currency and, as such, could be duplicated in identical formats. The number of print runs was proportional to the level of good intention. However, religious books and booklets possessed an ambiguous status. The scriptural spaces available on these objects could be used by local people for communication, advertisement, and announcement.

Analyzing donations allows us to observe the geographical and social scope of the transformation in practices, due to the rise of print culture at a local level. Scriptural objects hold a certain value within the moral or religious economy. For these reasons, donors often made explicit their personal information and the amount of money donated to show their good intentions. There were two main ways to participate in

this economy of good deeds. When a donation was made by individuals, married couples, or small groups of people, their identities and the amount of donated money usually figured on the cover-page. When a donation was made by a larger group, it often figured as a list inserted inside the book. These donations were mostly made at temples and pagodas.

In this article, I chose to limit my analysis to the Imprimerie du Mékong to present a complete and quantitative sample of publications and donations. The Imprimerie du Mékong is an interesting case for this study because it was the primary and main publisher of Hoà Hảo Buddhist books and booklets. Established in Sa Đéc, it was owned by Hồ Văn Sao, the co-director of the *New Progress* (1935–1938) weekly newspaper which appeared in Vĩnh Long and Sa Đéc.

The Indochinese collection of the National Library contains sixty-four non-periodicals published by the Imprimerie du Mékong from 1933 to 1942. Among them, at least forty-seven books were ordered and printed by local residents, with the intention to distribute them for free. This study is only possible since the digitization of the non-periodicals of the Indochinese collection, which allows direct access to these primary sources. It is important to note that bibliographic records from the Indochinese collection catalogues contain many errors. Most of them categorize donors as publishers or printers. I use Heurist to edit errors, and to describe and locate these donations. Data were manually extracted from digitized books of the Indochinese collection, then added and restructured in the Heurist database.

The Imprimerie du Mékong was an important place for religious printing services. Figure 5.3 shows temples and pagodas that gave money to print at the Imprimerie du Mékong between 1933 and 1942.

Compared to other printing houses in the delta, the Imprimerie du Mékong's customer base was broader and transnational. It stretched from Đồng Nai in the north of Cochinchina, to Phnom Penh in Cambodia, and to Rạch Giá in the south. There is an important concentration of individual and institutional donations from Châu Đốc, which was also an historical region of Hoà Hảo Buddhism, as well as other Buddhist "sects" in Cochinchina.

By the late 1930s, printing activities appear to have become an integral part of people's daily activities and way of life, even in the rural areas of the Mekong Delta. Heurist mapping option allows us to systematically locate data if geographic coordinates are available and input into the database. The following example shows a donation from Nguyễn Thị Thịnh who lived in Cần Thơ province (Photo 5.1).

Despite the existence of printers and publishers in Cần Thơ, a woman named Nguyễn Thị Thịnh chose to print 1,000 copies of a religious book at the Imprimerie du Mékong in Sa Đéc. A short summary of the book features an advertisement by the donor, who introduced herself as a healer serving people for free. As with other services, healers and occultists also benefited from the rise of printing, which helped to promote their practices.

Printed matter from donations constituted a singular discursive space, because the customer base who came to print these religious books and booklets was extremely diverse. Peasants and merchants from local markets could insert advertisement or personal messages in their publications. For example, one donor, Nguyễn Thị Năm,

Locations in Cochinchina	Temples and/or Pagodas
Bạc Liêu	Châu Viên
Bến Tre	Phú Long
Châu Đốc	Hoà Thành, Phước Điền, Châu Viên, Kỳ Viên, An Phước
Đồng Nai	Thanh Phước
Nhà Bè	Phước Linh
Rạch Giá	Thập Phương
Sa Đéc	Kim Huệ, Phước Long
Sài Gòn	Long Hưng
Trà Vinh	Phước Long

Fig. 5.3 Temples and pagodas that gave money to print at the Imprimerie du Mékong between 1933 and 1942. *Source* Author

owned a fish stall in Sa Đéc with her husband Lê Văn Chu. They ordered 1000 copies of a Buddhist Pure Land prayer from the Imprimerie du Mékong in 1936. On the back cover of the book, they left a note to thank people who supported their activities through the economic crisis. They explained that their donation was a means to express their gratitude to their customers and to invite whoever wished to talk with them to come meet them on their boat, which was moored next to the Sa Đéc fish market. One did not have to be literate but only needed to communicate a message orally to the printers for it to be transcribed and published. Hence, advertisements and announcements in these books constitute an important resource to investigate literacy and its relation to the rise of printing.

When collecting and analyzing information about donors, we also notice a singular manner of how people identified themselves. Some donors preferred to put down a nickname, or to be more precise, a familiar appellation linked to their surroundings, rather than their real name. Their nickname was always linked to a recognizable feature of their person, such as the place where they resided or their profession.

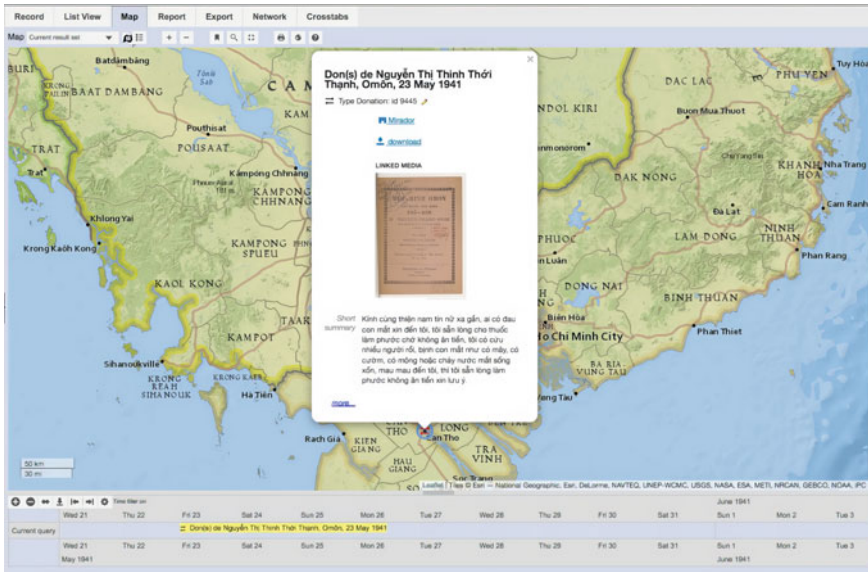


Photo 5.1 Example of a donation record on Heurist database with description and geographical coordinates. *Source* Author

Examples of nicknames from donors of the Imprimerie du Mékong are “the lady who sells sandwiches,” “the first-born sister from Sa Đéc,” “the couple of fish sellers at the Tân Phú Đông market,” or “the fourth son from Châu Đốc.” As it was important for donors to be seen and, more so, to be recognizable, these nicknames attest to social proximity, and even familiarity within a close and small community.

The Imprimerie du Mékong, like many other printing houses in Cochinchina, sought to gain customers by offering cheap services. They had special deals for religious requests and promoted them like in this advertisement:

Ladies and Gentlemen, we have printed many sutras recently thanks to our expert in Buddhist sutras, who checks and reviews printed characters. The owner of this printing house made a special vow to only ask for the cheapest printing cost for anyone who brings their sutra and uses our service. Customers who have printed multiple times here can attest to our very cheap price (Thịen 1934: n.p.)!

Further, the geographical extension and the diversity of their customer base shows a special dynamic. Although it is not yet possible to demonstrate with certainty to what extent the Imprimerie du Mékong was important in spreading or encouraging certain types of religious ideas and movements in the Mekong Delta, it is plausible to think that their specialization in printing religious texts and their marketing strategy strengthened the print culture in these locations. The study of book donations reveals a transformation of pre-existing practices, while these new printed materials are also the vector of a new social cohesion on a regional scale.

With the rise of print culture, the book became an object that embodied modernity. As such, it could be used to manifest respect, devotion, and reverence. The

symbolic value of a book differed substantially from periodicals because their usage was completely different in regard to donation. Inside donation circuits, books were not only a reading product but also a symbolic or religious currency. While religious debates figured largely in local newspapers, especially during the Buddhist reform movement in the 1920s, most religious books found in the Indochinese collection were destined for free distribution and obeyed this singular logic of donation. Thanks to the diffusion of the technology of the printing press and the expansion of print media in Cochinchina, anyone could order the publication of Buddhist sutras or prayers at their local printing house.

In sum, analyzing print culture allows us to arrive at a thicker description of the reality of interpersonal relations by making them visible, especially in rural or remote areas. By the end of the colonial period, the book had become a desirable yet affordable object. It was no longer solely a reading object destined for literate people, but an item of ordinary and daily life.

5.7 Conclusion

The rise of print media in the early twentieth century in Cochinchina is a complex phenomenon. While other authors have demonstrated the impact of print culture on communication, political organizations, and the birth of a Vietnamese public sphere, to date we lack an in-depth study of the socio-economic context of the publishing industry. This chapter demonstrates the potential of using the Indochinese collection and its digitized documents to fill that gap. It is now possible to name, locate, and measure the activities of publishers and printers: in short, to map the landscape of publishing in colonial Cochinchina.

Several features emerge from this landscape. The first is the breadth and depth of the publishing industry across the Mekong Delta, not just in Saigon. A brief presentation of the data collected from the Indochinese collection reveals a dynamic publishing industry, especially in urban areas. Second is the degree to which the industry was imbricated in the broader economy through trading networks, pharmaceutical retailers, local merchants, and small shop keepers. Books were produced in large numbers and circulated widely, serving simultaneously as a means to diffuse exciting new ideas and ways of living as well as an ordinary consumer good.

Another feature that emerges is the importance of religious publishing for the growth of the industry. The practice of devotees paying for the publication of religious texts was widespread, in some cases being the main or even sole activity for publishers or printers. The *Imprimerie du Mékong* was one such case, surviving for almost ten years with no other commercial activity. In this way, examining the landscape of publishing in colonial Indochina complicates typical binaries of traditional and modern, secular, and religious. Whether we should see the practice of book donation as the commodification of karma or the sacralization of commerce is debatable; what is clear, however, is that capitalist development, economic and social change, and religion were intimately related in colonial Cochinchina.

The importance of religious texts underlines how printed matter is not always destined to be read. The meaning of a book is not always to be found in the words it contains. A close examination of religious texts and their circulation complicates the commonly accepted understanding of capitalist development in colonial Indochina and its effects. Rather than dissolving social ties, the adoption of new technologies and the expansion of market relations could serve instead to connect people. Donated religious texts reduced the distance among individuals by creating common imaginaries and reinforcing donors' and readers' participation in a shared cosmology. In this way, close attention to the landscape of publishing in Cochinchina provides a unique window into ordinary life in colonial Indochina and the ideas and experiences of its people.

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