

Research of Mekong Delta Culture from the Canal System in the Western Cochinchina in the first of XX Century

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ABSTRACT: During the first colonial exploitation, the French colonialism planned and dug canals over the whole West of Cochinchina. The first purpose of the canal system was to serve military for suppressing revolutionary movements, the second purpose was economy. The canal system gave good conditions for this region to develop economy. In addition, there were strong exchanges and contacts with the Occidental culture. This contributed to change traditional cultural model of the resident in the Mekong Delta. Nowadays, the ancient canal system has still contribute important values to the economic and cultural development of the western Cochinchina in the early years of the 21st century.

Key words: The western Cochinchina, canal, material culture, spiritual culture

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1. France develops the canal system in the Southwest Cochinchina of Vietnam

The concept of the western Cochinchina is an administrative area according to the decree of Governor General of Indochina Paul Doumer signed on December 20, 1899. Accordingly, Cochinchina was divided into three regions: The east Cochinchina, The central Cochinchina and The western Cochinchina. The western Cochinchina, although slightly changed in terms of administrative boundaries due to the separation and merging of Ha Tien and Chau Doc provinces. But basically, from 1900 to 1939, the West consisted of the following seven provinces: Chau Doc, Ha Tien, Long Xuyen, Rach Gia, Can Tho, Soc Trang and Bac Lieu. This area is now roughly the area located in the southwest of Hau River, including the provinces and cities of An Giang, Can Tho, Kien Giang, Hau Giang, Soc Trang, Bac Lieu and Ca Mau. Regarding population, according to a document printed in 1926, the total population of Cochinchina has 3,970,594 people. The population in the western Cochinchina in 1926 according to the statistics of this document was 1,290,933 people¹. The Giap Tuat Treaty between the Nguyen dynasty and the French colonialists was signed in 1874 and Cochinchina officially became a French colony. First, the French implemented the construction of infrastructure and techniques for long-term investment and exploitation. In the last years of the nineteenth century, the French colonialists began to pay attention to economic development, especially the production of rice. First, the French colonialists carried out a plan to develop the canal system along with the expansion of agricultural land. "From 1880-1890, the Indochina Government dug in 2,100,000 m³ of canal land, resulting in an increase of 169,000 ha of land compared to the Nguyen Dynasty. On average, for every 12 cubic meters of soil, there is an additional 1 hectare of arable land. Under the command of French officers and governors and often dependent on the personal opinions of the provincial governors, they mobilized our people to dig canals. Notable canals include: Ba Lang, Cai Con, Carabelli, KeSach, Thanh Loi, Ba Tich, TraNoc, Ong Truong, Cai Muong"². When the canals were finished, people scattered from all over the world gathered along the canals, built houses, reclaimed the wasteland along both sides of the canal into fields and carried out agricultural cultivation. Therefore, land is increasing rapidly. The first colonial exploitation in Indochina was associated with Paul Doumer – Governor General of Indochina. He carried out his plans in western Cochinchina. In the project of the Action Program of the Governor General of Indochina in 1897-1902, sent to the Minister of Colonies on March 22, 1897, it was written "to pay attention to building great equipment for Indochina, such as building a system railways, roads, canals, harbors... things necessary for mining..."³.

¹ Department of Geography, Geography book, printed in Quy Nhon, An Nam, 1926.

² Phan Khanh, Southern region - 300 years of irrigation, Agriculture Publishing House, 2005, p.107.

³ Le Quoc Su, Some issues about Vietnam's economic history, Social Sciences Publishing House, 1999, p.216.

The speed of economic development took place very quickly, leading to changes in many socio-economic fields in the western Cochinchina. Canals in all the western provinces had important strategic economic significance for the French bourgeoisie.

Table 1. Canals in the western provinces of Cochinchina in the early twentieth century⁴

Province	Names of important canals
Rach Gia	Ben Ngu, Rach Soi-Bassac, Rach Gia-Long Xuyen, Ba Hon...
Can Tho	Xa No, Bassac-Cai Lon, O Mon, Soc Tro, Nicolai, Xeo Vong
Bac Lieu	Bac Lieu-Ca Mau, Quan Lo-Phung Hiep, Canh Den, Bay Hap-Ganh Hao...
Soc Trang	Saintard, Nouet, Cai Con, Ke Sach, Tam Soc, Cai Trau, Dai Ngai...
Long Xuyen	Cha Va, Dinh Hoa, Chac Ca Dao, Tham Ton, Ba The...
Chau Doc	Vinh Te, Vinh An, Cong Don, Nui Sam...
Ha Tien	Rach Gia-Ha Tien

With nearly 450 km of canals completed in the western Cochinchina, the prospect of land along both sides of the canals is great. However, in order to turn wasteland into rice-growing land, a lot of money and labor must be invested. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the colonial government in Indochina created favorable conditions for the French bourgeoisie to invest and exploit the western Cochinchina.

2. Cultural values formed from the canal system in the western Cochinchina of the first half of the twentieth century

2.1. Material culture

Through the digging of canals, the people of Western Cochinchina gradually came into contact with the material values of Western civilization brought about by the scientific and technical revolution of the mid-eighteenth century. The French brought to this land the machinery and equipment to conduct canal digging and agricultural economic cultivation. In particular, the ladles that appeared in the Southwest of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are a typical example.

The image of the ladles in the far West is impressive to the people here. It is difficult to describe their feelings when they first see a Western science and technology product in action right in front of them. The monsters growled loudly through the woods. Author Son Nam in the old Can Tho article published many times in Can Tho newspaper described these feelings in detail. "The large, international-class ladles digging the XaNo canal bearing the names of Nantes, Loire (the name of the city, the name of the river in France), the people call Xang Nan, Xang La, "la" because it screams like an evil beast⁵.

Along with the use of ladles to dig canals, the French colonialists also established experimental stations in Can Tho province with plans to renovate and repair fields, focusing on improving farming methods and techniques such as changing plowing methods, transplanting rice at the right distance, threshing in baskets, forms of rice preservation⁶....At times, dealing with the scarcity of workers, the French bourgeoisie also invested in putting machines into the plantations. We keep thinking that, in French times, farmers in the Southwest had to pull plows instead of buffaloes. This is absolutely true for the vast majority. However, we can also see that in the early years of the twentieth century, the French bourgeoisie introduced plows into the fields and this activity took place very normally. "In 1918, Sambuc also tried plows and harrows in an 8,000-hectare plantation in Can Tho province, and in the following years, French and American plows and harrows were put to the test in the fields of Cochinchina⁷".

Bicycles, cars, canoes, phonographs... also followed the lines of the sutras introduced throughout the western Cochinchina. The values of western civilization have really fascinated the Vietnamese people, even the Confucianists. Not everyone can explain the miracle of the western scientific and technical means that the French brought. Listening to the gramophone, it is assumed that some old wizard turned people small and locked them in a box, forcing them to sing to everyone.

In the early twentieth century, the residents of the western Cochinchina approached the Occidental culture quite quickly. From receiving, using Occidental technical means such as gramophones, bicycles, cars ... to the habits in daily material activities such as eating, wearing, staying also have positive changes. In the early

⁴Source: *Monograph of the province of Rach Gia, Can Tho, Bac Lieu, Soc Trang, Long Xuyen, Ha Tien*

⁵Son Nam, "Can Tho in the past", *Can Tho Newspaper* (No. 262), October 30, 1994.

⁶Nguyen Phan Quang, *Rice market in Cochinchina from 1860 to 1945*, General Publishing House of Ho Chi Minh City, 2004, p.22.

⁷Huynh Lua, *History of the reclamation history of the Southern region*, Ho Chi Minh City Publishing House, 1987, p.23.

twentieth century, it was not difficult to see people in western Cochinchina wearing suits, shoes, and hair cropped short in the style of the Occidental culture. They also gradually know how to use knives and forks in daily eating. French-style houses have appeared quite a lot in the western Cochinchina. French architecture, which is very famous for its elegant beauty combined with traditional Vietnamese architectural features, has created architectural works with both the Oriental and the Occidental elements.

2.2. Spiritual culture

Western cultural elements are rooted in the new land and have conditions for development. When Vietnamese residents realized that Western culture also has very unique and humane things, so they followed. Thus, cultural contact in the form of cultural coercion has gradually transformed into voluntary cultural communication. The customs of the Vietnamese people in the western Cochinchina follow the flow of that cultural communication and selectively absorb the Occidental cultural elements. From the perspective of the canal system, we offer a number of examples that shed light on the cultural and spiritual values of the residents of the western Cochinchina formed through exposure to Occidental culture.

Firstly, a lot of new places appear to have originated from canal digging. Folk places are often associated with the word “Xang” as a way of affirming that the place is related to the ladles used to dig the canal. For example, VamXang, XangThoi Lake, KinhXang, XangChim, Xang No, Xang Moi... There are also a few special cases where the word “Xang” is not present, but the places are related to digging of canals. For example, in the case of Ba Dam canal in Can Tho area.

The process of digging the Xa No canal as we mentioned above, in addition to the appearance of the place name Xa No, there are also a series of other places related to this canal. Currently, visitors to Hau Giang province by National Highway 61B, will see bridges named Bridge 2000, Bridge 3000, Bridge 4,500.... Bridge 14,000... or other places like Seven Thousand town, Four Cantons One Thousand... This sometimes gives us an interesting curiosity about the above strange-sounding places. In fact, the above places are not only derived from Xa No canal, they are also related to the capitalist mode of production conducted by the French in the plantation system here.

Many place names in western Cochinchina are of French origin, usually taking the name of the French person responsible for digging the canal. This they can see in the western provinces of Cochinchina such as Can Tho with Nicolai canal, Soc Trang with Saintard canal and Nouet canal, Chau Doc with Sept Montagnes channel ... It can be confirmed that from the digging of canals by the French colonialists, many new places appeared in the western Cochinchina. Over hundreds of years, these landmarks still exist as evidence of a tumultuous period of reclaiming history.

Secondly, the canal directly affects the personalities of residents of the western Cochinchina in the culture of behavior and the language of communication. On this issue, we are allowed to present with our subjective views, that is, of a resident born and raised in the western Cochinchina. Therefore, it may not be the same opinion as some readers as well as those who study culture.

Besides, the canal system in the western Cochinchina enters culture and art in a very natural way like the mentality of westerners. In the field of folklore, many songs, proverbs, idioms, chants... related to the canal system appeared quite a lot, even becoming the catchphrases of westerners.

3. Conclusion

The cultural values of the residents of the western Cochinchina in their development history have inherited and promoted the good values of the nation's cultural values. This is a positive inheritance, making the national culture have new values.

Western culture was introduced to the western Cochinchina quite early and developed strongly in the early years of the twentieth century. The canal system conducted by the French has created conditions for the western Cochinchina to make new developments in the economic field. The economic development has brought changes in the social and cultural structure. The culture of the residents of the westernmost region has the opportunity to interact with western cultural elements and create great achievements in terms of material culture and spiritual culture.

The canal system has been formed and developed for more than 100 years. In addition to the initial military and economic factors, the cultural values of the residents of the western Cochinchina also developed rapidly. The established rice roads have turned this land into a rich and full of potential. The cultural values formed and developed have contributed to the creation of the residents of the westernmost region of the country bearing the imprint of a time of reclamation. Dynamic contact with external cultural values has made the culture of this land have changed, developed and has its own characteristics in the current conditions of world cultural integration.

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