

Portland State University

PDXScholar

---

Young Historians Conference

Young Historians Conference 2014

---

Apr 29th, 10:30 AM - 11:45 AM

# An Assessment of Ho Chi Minh's Strategies for Gaining Support in the Vietnamese Revolution

Madeline Fraser  
*St. Mary's Academy*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/younghistorians>



Part of the Asian History Commons, and the Political History Commons

**Let us know how access to this document benefits you.**

---

Fraser, Madeline, "An Assessment of Ho Chi Minh's Strategies for Gaining Support in the Vietnamese Revolution" (2014). *Young Historians Conference*. 2.

<https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/younghistorians/2014/oralpres/2>

This Event is brought to you for free and open access. It has been accepted for inclusion in Young Historians Conference by an authorized administrator of PDXScholar. For more information, please contact [pdxscholar@pdx.edu](mailto:pdxscholar@pdx.edu).

An Assessment of Ho Chi Minh's Strategies for Gaining Support in the Vietnamese Revolution

Madeline Fraser  
PSU Hst. 102/Hon. Modern European History  
Mr. Vannelli  
16 December 2013

From the First Chinese Domination of Vietnam in 111 BCE, to the establishment of French Indochina in 1885, to the invasion of Vietnam by Japan during WWII, Vietnam has had a turbulent history of subjugation. However, in the 1940s, one man by the name of Ho Chi Minh successfully liberated the nation from the clutches of imperialism, beginning with the August Revolution in 1945 and ending with the Battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954. Despite the relatively sizeable awareness of Vietnam in the United States as a result of its attempt to overthrow Ho's government due to the Western fear of communism and the "domino effect," there is little focus on the revolution that led to the establishment of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. In the West, Ho was characterized as a ruthless communist, yet he remains one of the most revered figures in Vietnamese history. In fact, his mausoleum serves as Vietnam's Mecca, a place to which people flock to pay their respects to "Uncle Ho." Why, despite the later criticisms of communism as well as of the groups with which Ho was associated, is he immortalized in Vietnamese history? Additionally, what tactics did Ho employ that enabled the success of the Vietnamese Revolution as no other movements had done? Ho was well versed in European political theory, and came to recognize Marxism-Leninism as a viable government strategy for Vietnam. Yet, revolution is a difficult thing to accomplish. Harder still is convincing a nation to adopt an entirely foreign structure of government in the process. Despite Ho Chi Minh's strong belief in communist ideals, his strategies for gaining support in the Vietnamese Revolution reveal a more moderate position, one that relied on propaganda, fragments of political ideologies, and compromise. In fact, Ho adopted Lenin's concept of a two-stage revolution that begins with national independence and ends with internal societal revolution. Ho's primary dedication to ending French imperialism drove him to take on a more compromising, less dogmatic approach,

one that would allow support for the revolution to extend beyond communist cadres to the greater public.

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, France had become one of the largest colonial powers in the world, second only to Great Britain. In 1887, the French established French Indochina, which was comprised of Vietnam and its three regions of Annam, Chochinchina, Tonkin; Cambodia; and eventually Laos. As has been the case with many colonial nations, the French failed to foster a positive relationship with the Vietnamese, a historically educated and self-sufficient people.<sup>1</sup> The French imposed their European values and traditions on the Vietnamese, in the 1920s ending programs such as the Confucian bureaucratic examinations that provided peasants with a means to gain status, but in turn failed to implement successful educational reforms of their own. The French, however, were not the last to invade the country prior to the Vietnamese Revolution. In 1940, Germany defeated the French Vichy government, subsequently allowing Germany's ally, the Japanese, to invade Vietnam. While the Japanese did not technically oust the French from power until 1945, they effectively controlled the country through the French, using the opportunity to seize Vietnam's ports and extract as much raw material as possible. Once the Japanese had pushed aside the French, they installed the Nguyen emperor, Bao Dai, as a puppet, whose government offered little legitimacy, and in many ways set the stage for the Ho Chi Minh's August Revolution.<sup>2</sup>

Today, Ho Chi Minh remains one of the most respected individuals in Vietnam, but he was a man of humble beginnings. Ho was born in 1890 to a poor but educated family in the

---

<sup>1</sup> Edwin E. Moise, "The Vietnam Wars: Background," *Clemson University*, November 4, 1998, <http://www.clemson.edu/caah/history/FacultyPages/EdMoise/viet1.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Edwin E. Moise, "The Vietnam Wars: The Emergence of the Viet Minh," *Clemson University*, November 4, 1998, <http://www.clemson.edu/caah/history/FacultyPages/EdMoise/viet2.html>.

village of Hoang Tru, with a given name of Nguyen Sinh Cung<sup>3</sup>. His father, Nguyen Sinh Sac, a scholar who had entered the Confucian bureaucracy by means of the civil service examinations, stressed the importance of education and knowledge. Nguyen Sinh Sac passed the Confucian civil service examinations, which tested an applicant's knowledge of Confucian teachings and writings. Ho's exposure to these teachings and values would be apparent in his later life. Former Professor of Contemporary History at the Universite Paris VII-Denis Diderot, Pierre Brocheux, notes that Ho's father placed a sign in the Nguyen family home that read, "Good studies will lift you out of poverty," a clear indication that Ho's drive for knowledge was not accidental or entirely self-discovered.<sup>4</sup> Ho also imbibed a sense of patriotism and social justice from his father and his close associates, the nationalist patriots Phan Boi Chau and Phan Chu Trinh. Nguyen Sinh Sac held great contempt for the corrupt imperial bureaucratic system<sup>5</sup>, advocated for the underrepresented, and was involved in the "Revolt of the Short Hairs," an offshoot of a larger movement which focused on modernizing Vietnamese institutions.<sup>6</sup>

Ho's patriotic and anti-French sentiments, and to some extent his involvement in patriotic activities, were formed while attending the Quoc Hoc (National Academy) in Hue from 1907-1918.<sup>7</sup> After dismissal from the academy for political activity in 1908, Ho spent the next three years avoiding the imperial authorities as he worked his way to Saigon. In 1911, Ho signed on as an assistant cook on a French ocean liner and left Indochina to discover what the world could teach him. Ho settled in Paris where he was exposed to the currents of political thought in pre-

---

<sup>3</sup> As a boy, Ho Chi Minh was known as Nguyen Sinh Cung and he later went by the name Nguyen Ai Quoc.

<sup>4</sup> Pierre Brocheux, *Ho Chi Minh: A Biography*, trans. Claire Duiker (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 3.

<sup>5</sup> William J. Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh: A Life* (New York: Hyperion, 2000), 29.

<sup>6</sup> Brocheux, 4.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 34-38.

WWI France, particularly socialism and communism.<sup>8</sup> As an adolescent, he had been exposed to the values of the French Revolution, of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity, values that were ironically absent in Vietnam, but were very much alive in Paris even for a Vietnamese émigré.<sup>9</sup> Ho quickly became involved in what he believed to be anti-colonial groups, including the French Socialist Party, but was wholly dissatisfied when he realized that such groups were more concerned about the state of France than what Ho called the “colonial question.”<sup>10</sup> He spent his spare time studying political theory and the teachings of Communist and Socialist masters such as Marx and Lenin, and was a founding member of the French Communist Party.<sup>11</sup> Ho left France in 1923 predominantly because of his interest in the work of the Comintern and in attending the Stalin School, which trained revolutionaries from Asia and from the non-Russian eastern regions of Greater Russia. His political activity in France had begun to alarm French authorities, and, as a result, Ho had to go undercover to board a train to Moscow.<sup>12</sup> Once there, he allied himself with the Comintern and enrolled in the Stalin School, where he was exposed to Marxist-Leninist theory. In France, Ho grew tired of the Eurocentric presentation of Marxist-Leninist values, that is, the assertion that they were best fit for a European model. In Moscow, he explained to the Comintern that they needed to “revise Marxism, down to its historical foundations, by strengthening it with Oriental ethnology.”<sup>13</sup> Tired of inaction, Ho decided to leave for China and associate himself with Vietnamese expatriates and Chinese communists whom he believed might also wish to act on their revolutionary ideas.

---

<sup>8</sup> Brocheux, 13- 22.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 14

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 14-22.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 23-24.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 27.

In August of 1924, Ho boarded a train to China. As an agent of the Comintern, he was expected to rally and in a sense indoctrinate individuals for the greater communist cause, but his actions indicate that his primary concern was the ending of French imperialism in Vietnam. Phan Boi Chau, a Vietnamese nationalist and scholar who had formed the *Viet Nam Quoc Dan Dang*, the Vietnamese Nationalist Party, had a concentration of allies in Canton, Guangdong. Phan and his followers, Ho noted, failed to embrace a doctrine or ideological platform for their revolutionary ideas, instead insisting that the people should select one once the French were ousted.<sup>14</sup> As one might guess, this posed a perfect opportunity for Ho to introduce the values of Communism to the essentially ideology-lacking assembly. Phan's arrest by French police served as an additional bonus for Ho, for this allowed him to form the Youth Revolutionary League. The League, made up of Vietnamese expatriates as well as Chinese, was a departure from Phan's weak organization, but as the name indicates, still triumphed revolution over communist thought. That is not to say that this organization was not centered around communist doctrine, for it was, but it employed this doctrine in order to ensure the success of the party, for as Ho noted in one of the League's pamphlets of propaganda, "there is no revolutionary movement without revolutionary theory."<sup>15</sup> Thus, it can be gleaned from Ho's insights that Communism primarily served as a vehicle for promoting the revolutionary cause.

In 1929, after travelling in Asia and Europe following the sacking of the League's base in Canton by Chiang Kai-Shiek's anti-communist government, Ho returned to China, this time to Hong Kong. His mission was to unite the various communist groups and supporters in China and Vietnam, for at the time there were many factions and splinter groups with fairly similar names, motives, and beliefs. In 1930, Ho pushed to call the new party the Vietnamese Communist Party,

---

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 37.

with the hope that the party would target peasants and other exploited peoples.<sup>16</sup> The Comintern, on the other hand, demanded that the party be called the Indochinese Communist Party, and was critical that the party was too nationalist in its focus and too reliant on a small number of communist intellectuals.<sup>17</sup> Professor William Duiker<sup>18</sup> of Penn State University notes, the change of the party name from “Vietnamese” to “Indochinese” was most likely intended to bring focus back to international concerns, not the Vietnamese struggle for independence.<sup>19</sup> At the time of the party’s founding, Ho published an appeal that outlined the party’s goals, but most importantly discussed the strategies that he hoped to employ in the revolution. Despite the name change, Vietnam and France were the only countries that Ho named outright in the appeal. Additionally, the appeal contained an immediate compromise from Marxist values, one that indicates that Ho had held steadfast to his intention of freeing Vietnam from French rule. Point number five called for the “Confiscat[ion] [of the] the whole of the plantations and property belonging to the imperialists and Vietnamese reactionary capitalist class and [the] distribut[ion] [of the land] to poor peasants.”<sup>20</sup> Marx wrote in-depth on land redistribution, essentially arguing that while the economic welfare of the peasantry was essential to the success of a communist state, feudal land or capitalist owned land should be held by the state.<sup>21</sup> Communal ownership, that is, not independent ownership, was key. Ho’s statement not only drifted from Marx’s ideas and the Stalinist line, but it also mentioned the redistribution of imperialist’s land; the imperialists in question, no doubt, being the French. Ho did not focus on redistributing land

---

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>17</sup> Duiker, 165.

<sup>18</sup> William Duiker also served as a United States Foreign Service Officer in South Vietnam

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 187.

<sup>20</sup> Ho Chi Minh, *Ho Chi Minh on Revolution: Selected Writings, 1920-66*, ed. Bernard B. Fall (New York: Signet Books, 1968), 131.

<sup>21</sup> Tony Cliff, “Marxism and the Collectivisation of Agriculture, Part 1,” *Marxist Internet Archive*, last modified October 18, 2002, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/cliff/works/1964/xx/collect1.htm>.



belonging to the bourgeois class or even the land of wealthy peasants, but instead focused on those who would most radically oppose the Vietnamese Revolution, that is, the French.

Ho Chi Minh founded the Viet Minh in 1941, taking advantage of the decline of French power in Vietnam following the first invasion by the Japanese. The group, officially known as the Vietnam Independence League, aimed to gain control of Vietnam and saw World War II as a blessing in disguise.<sup>22</sup> Following Japan's complete takeover of Vietnam in early 1945, Ho sent Viet Minh rebels and the group's propaganda wing into many districts of the Viet Bac border region of northern Tonkin to strengthen its presence after successful French sweeps of the area in 1944. To the delight of the Viet Minh, the Japanese military abolished the colonial administration of the French Vichy on the 9<sup>th</sup> of March, 1945 in a coup d'état, as a result curtailing French action against the Viet Minh, and effectively putting an end to French rule in Vietnam.<sup>23</sup> Although the Japanese placed the Emperor Bao Dai on the throne in Hue in a show of legitimacy, they managed to retain complete control of the country. By June, the Viet Minh had established the Viet Bac Free Zone within Vietnamese territory and the Viet Minh leadership perceived that much of Tonkin was ripe for revolt after poor rice harvests, floods, famine, high inflation, and war destruction, another unexpected bonus that resulted from the war. Upon hearing the news of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki on August 6<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup>, Ho convened in the village of Tan Trao the Ninth Plenum of the Central Committee on August 12<sup>th</sup>, and the National People's Congress of Party and Viet Minh delegates on August 16<sup>th</sup>.<sup>24</sup> The Committee initiated a general insurrection throughout Vietnam, and called for the creation of an independent Democratic Republic of Vietnam and elected a National Liberation Committee with

---

<sup>22</sup> Frances Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2002), 62.

<sup>23</sup> Duiker, 295.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 305.

Ho Chi Minh as chairperson. Ho clearly understood that the imminent surrender of the Japanese would lead to the incursion of British, French, or Nationalist Chinese occupation forces, and that therefore the Viet Minh needed to strike immediately to seize independence while a power vacuum still existed.<sup>25</sup> Some Committee members and delegates felt that the Viet Minh, whose Vietnamese Liberation Army forces only amounted to five thousand cadres, was insufficiently strong to sustain an insurrection, but Ho succeeded in convincing the Committee and the Congress that a position of strength was critical in the face of Allied occupation forces.<sup>26</sup> In addition, in order to temper the euphoria, Ho expressed the opinion that it would be necessary to negotiate with the French for a “progressive independence” rather than to sustain a full-scale assault against superior forces.<sup>27</sup>

In truth, the August Revolution was a coup d’état by the Viet Minh that succeeded due to the political vacuum caused by the surrender of Japanese forces. The Viet Minh was able to sustain its drive for independence because the enfeebled French attempt to reconquer and recolonize Vietnam allowed the coup d’état to morph into a war of liberation. The peasantry, workers, the scholar-gentry, and even the small number of bourgeoisie identified with the cause of national independence to a greater degree “than they wished not to be ruled by a Communist government.”<sup>28</sup> Indeed, for the average Vietnamese, the concept of a Vietnamese nation was not an abstraction since there had been an historical independent Vietnam, not simply a vassal state of China, with which every Vietnamese identified. According to Duiker, Ho himself explained that the August Revolution would lead to a period of democratic patriotism and unity, something

---

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 304

<sup>27</sup> Brocheux, 93

<sup>28</sup> John Dunn, *Modern Revolutions: An Introduction to the Analysis of a Political Phenomenon*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 130.

with which most Vietnamese could support, long before it the country could transition to communism, in following with Lenin's revolutionary theory.<sup>29</sup>

As stated, following the end of World War II and the defeat of the Japanese, the French recognized an opportunity to recolonize Vietnam. The French had suffered terribly in the war, meaning eager spirits, and of course adequate funds, were hard to come by. The French, hoping to avoid war but wishing to preserve their "dignity," agreed to negotiations with the Viet Minh. The negotiations aimed at finding a middle ground, one that would allow relative autonomy for the Vietnamese but allow France to continue its involvement and maintain its claim over the country, two seemingly incongruous and paradoxical goals.<sup>30</sup> Yet, an agreement was reached. The terms states that the French military could enter Vietnam to assist with the withdrawal of Chinese and Japanese troops, and that the French would recognize the Vietnamese government and give it membership to the French Union.<sup>31</sup> Ho made a choice that he hoped would benefit the people and prevent unnecessary deaths, but his people reacted negatively, believing that he had betrayed and abandoned them. Following the agreement, the Viet Minh's French newspaper, *La Republique*, described the people's negative reaction, but emphasized their continued support and trust in Ho. "But they still have their foundation," an article<sup>32</sup> explained, "since the confidence they put in the person of Ho Chi Minh taught them to do the right thing."<sup>33</sup> Despite his supposed blunder, the rapport that Ho maintained with his fellow Vietnamese allowed for his continued support. Yet, unfortunately, the deal with the French fell through when Ho went to Paris to sign the final treaty. The French continued to push for an agreement that would grant

---

<sup>29</sup> Duiker, 326

<sup>30</sup> Halberstam, 85-86.

<sup>31</sup> Halberstam, 86.

<sup>32</sup> Brocheux does not mention the name of the article, and I have yet to successfully locate it in another source.

<sup>33</sup> Brocheux, 116.

them sovereignty over Vietnam, essentially one that would make Vietnam only nominally free from colonialism. Ho even accepted a plan that would allow for slow and progressive liberation, but the French even shut down this concession. Ho had already compromised, and to compromise any further would be to agree to the French continued colonization of the country. And thus, on September 14<sup>th</sup>, 1946, a merely titular deal was struck, one which journalist and historian David Halberstam describes as “an agreement to disagree, a decision which solved nothing and which only meant that the anti-negotiation forces on both sides would become stronger in the coming months.”<sup>34</sup> The war began on the 18<sup>th</sup> of December, 1946, and would rage until the Battle of Bien Dien Phu in 1954. Even then, Ho would be forced to compromise, this time for the freedom of only half of the country. Throughout the revolution, Ho recognized the importance of gradual progress; one could not be overzealous in the delicate battle for freedom.

While a general understanding of the Vietnamese Revolution reveals many of the specific tactics that Ho employed, an in-depth analysis of his techniques in compromise, writing, recruitment, and propaganda provide a fuller picture of Ho’s political strategy. One common thread that runs through Ho Chi Minh’s work in the Vietnamese revolution is the willingness to compromise, which stemmed from Ho’s deep desire for social change and freedom from the oppression of the French. Ho certainly never disputed the fact that he believed in communist doctrine, yet on numerous occasions he explained that his primary goal was merely equality and Vietnamese freedom. An article in the *Bolshevik Review* criticized Ho’s dedication to Vietnam, and indirectly his willingness to let go of certain communist goals.<sup>35</sup> The author denounced Ho’s “nationalist tendencies and his mistaken directives regarding the fundamental issues of the

---

<sup>34</sup> Halberstam, 91.

<sup>35</sup> Brocheux, 64.

bourgeois democratic revolution.”<sup>36</sup> The issue for the Comintern was Ho’s readiness to hold off on an assault of the petty bourgeois class and his focus on crushing the imperialists, which became increasingly apparent as the war went on. While in China prior to the August Revolution, Ho explained that he was of course a communist, but “what [was] important to [him was] the independence and the freedom of [his] country, not communism.”<sup>37</sup> In fact, he outright guaranteed that “communism [would] not become a reality in Vietnam for another fifty years.”<sup>38</sup> For Ho, the communist doctrine remained a starting point, a blueprint, a place of inspiration. The goal for Ho was not to create a communist nation over which he could preside, but instead a land of freedom and opportunity, one spoken of in the Declaration of the Rights of Man or in the United States Declaration of Independence.<sup>39</sup> In 1945, following the August Revolution, Ho explained to Charles Fenn, a U.S. intelligence officer, his rationale for adopting Marxism-Leninism as a road map for the nationalist struggle, stating that a successful revolution requires “a set of beliefs, a gospel, a practical analysis, [one] might even say a bible” and that “Marxism-Leninism gave [him] that framework.”<sup>40</sup> Continuing with this idea, Ho’s digressions from the Marxist-Leninist doctrine can be viewed not as personal failings or hypocritical actions, but merely as necessary actions intended to give rise to the paramount goal: national liberation. Directly after the founding of Ho’s provisional government and the National Liberation Committee on the 27<sup>th</sup> of August 1945, Ho made it clear that Vietnamese unity was imperative to the success of the revolution. He proclaimed that the new government must be broad in ideology in order to “reflect all progressive strata and political elements in the country.”<sup>41</sup> Unlike prior

---

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Halberstam, 81.

<sup>40</sup> Duiker, 570.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 321.

revolutionaries, Ho recognized the importance of not only unity, but also of sacrifice and compromise. Ho accepted the improbability of achieving all of his lofty goals in one fell swoop, and thus acted accordingly. Prior to the agreement with France regarding Vietnam's sovereignty and the admittance of French troops to the country in 1946, Ho attempted to unite outlying nationalist groups and other potential supporters to bolster the revolutionary cause. While he was not entirely successful, his efforts demonstrate a keen desire to compromise for the sake of the greater good. Ruth Fischer, the renowned founder of the Austrian Communist Party, notes that, as usual, "Ho acted as a moderator among the conflicting factions."<sup>42</sup> Overall, Ho's ability to put the future of the country above his ideological biases, along with his use of propaganda, aided in the unification of the people.

Interestingly, one of the most prominent pieces of writing that came out of the revolution was the Vietnamese Declaration of Independence, written on December 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1945, days after the famous August Revolution. Not once does the document mention communism. Instead, it hails writings of John Locke, the Declaration of Independence of the United States of America, and the Declaration of the Rights of Man. After directly quoting the aforementioned works, Ho explained that values of freedom and life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are "undeniable truths."<sup>43</sup> He stated that the French failed to follow their own founding principles in the colony of Vietnam, pointing out their blatant hypocrisy. The rest of the declaration includes vivid details of the terrible atrocities<sup>44</sup> committed by the French and Japanese. "They have built more prisons than schools" he wrote, "They have mercilessly slain our patriots; they have drowned our

---

<sup>42</sup> Ruth Fischer, "Ho Chi Minh: Disciplined Communist," *Foreign Affairs*, 23, no. 1 (1954): 86-97, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20031077>.

<sup>43</sup> Ho Chi Minh, 141.

<sup>44</sup> Speaking of course, from Ho's perspective. Undoubtedly the French and Japanese would speak similarly of the actions of the Vietnamese.

uprisings in rivers of blood.”<sup>45</sup> These comments pandered to the people’s emotions and sense of patriotism whilst remaining ideologically neutral. In short, Ho focused the Declaration on societal unity and freedom, following Lenin’s strategy for a two-stage revolution.

Often regarded as a religion in the west, Confucianism is technically a philosophy, a school of thought, a value system, and a way of life, particularly in pre-revolutionary China and Vietnam. It dominated the life of these cultures, and continues to do so to the present. The philosophy stresses respect, loyalty, relationships, and other common values found in various cultures’ morality systems. As scholar and intellectual Nguyen Khac Vien notes, Marxism defines man as the total of his relationships.<sup>46</sup> Similarly, one of the main tenets of Confucianism is social harmony and respect for relationships. The structure of the Vietnamese village called for a sense of communalism, which easily lent itself to Marxism, an ideology that stresses the importance of abolishing capitalism and establishing a society in which everything is owned and operated in common. Duiker explains that the “philosophical transition from Confucius to Marx was easier to make than that to Adam Smith and John Stuart Mill, who stressed such unfamiliar concepts as materialism and individualism.”<sup>47</sup> One of the most striking examples of Ho’s delicate use of Confucian propaganda emerged from an interrogation of a Viet Minh soldier. The interrogators questioned the soldier, asking if he had informed his parents of his decision to join the forces, and he replied that he had not. According to the soldier, the Viet Minh said,

Comrade, your words show that you are a fine son filled with filial piety and we admire that very much, but you have to choose between filial duty and duty to your country. In this war the people are your family too, and you have to suffer. If you do your duty toward your parents--- tell them of your decision--- then you fail your country. But if you

---

<sup>45</sup> Ho Chi Minh, 141.

<sup>46</sup> Nguyen Khac Vien, *Tradition and Revolution in Vietnam*, trans. Linda Yarr, Jayne Werner, Tran Tuong Nhu (Berkeley: Indochina Resource Center, 1974), 47.

<sup>47</sup> Duiker, 63.

fulfill your duty toward your country, then by the same act you will have completed your duty toward your family, because they will be free and no longer exploited.<sup>48</sup>

While Ho himself did not speak these words, they reflect the values and beliefs of the Ho's Viet Minh. Based on the soldier's report, the Viet Minh alluded to one of the main pillars of Confucianism, filial piety, and then transformed this value into something greater, something imperative to the revolutionary cause. In the eyes of the Viet Minh, filial piety extended beyond ancestors and parents to country. By honoring his duty to his country, the soldier not only honored his fellow people, but also his parents. By joining the forces he would receive the greatest reward and fulfill his duty, and by not doing so, he would fail not just his country, but also his parents: the boy had but one clear choice. This clever, and admittedly manipulative strategy demonstrates how Ho was able to rally the Vietnamese. He targeted their desire to live up to the values that had been ingrained in their society for centuries, presenting national unity as the only honorable option. Historian John T. McAlister, Jr. and the notable French expert on Vietnam, Paul Mus, mention that Ho used old concepts and applied them to new values and goals in order to develop a strong revolutionary spirit.<sup>49</sup> The art of his plan was that he "linke[d] the villagers to a new sense of Viet Nam as a nation by making their traditions relevant to participation in the modern politics of revolution."<sup>50</sup> While the French has abolished the Confucian bureaucracy in Vietnam, they failed to extinguish the philosophy's cultural importance. As a result, Ho was able to incorporate it into his platform and rely on its principles for propaganda.

It can also be noted that Ho's image undoubtedly helped to unify the Vietnamese, or at least garner their support for the revolution. Steven Saxonberg, Professor of Sociology at

---

<sup>48</sup> Halberstam, 93.

<sup>49</sup> John T. McAlister Jr. and Paul Mus, *The Vietnamese and Their Revolution* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1970), 24.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.



Masaryk University in the Czech Republic, notes that Ho, unlike the Chinese Chairman Mao, did not create a “personality cult.”<sup>51</sup> Although perhaps not an intentional form of propaganda, the simplistic lifestyle and mode of operating that Ho lived humanized him and made him seem like less of a politician, and more like a family member to his people. Wearing the garments of the peasantry and simple sandals, Ho acted with an air of humility. While this style of dress made him more or less a laughing stock in Western countries, it added to his credibility in Vietnam.<sup>52</sup> The Vietnamese were not new to abuses of power, and while the emperors and later French colonists lived lavishly, they, for the most part, remained in poverty. For Ho to adopt any other style would be to abandon the very principles of the revolution, a revolution fought on the principles of equality, unity, and freedom from oppression. The American author of *The Quiet American*, Graham Greene, expressed his belief that one of the reasons the Vietnamese were reluctant to accept America’s South Vietnamese puppet, Ngo Dinh Diem, was his failure to “walk in the rice fields unprotected, learn... the hard way how to be loved and obeyed,” which of course is nothing other than an allusion to the ways of Ho.<sup>53</sup> In contrast, Ho referred to himself as “Uncle Ho,” and over time the Vietnamese came to embrace it, using it as a sign of respect and reverence.<sup>54</sup> Following the August Revolution, at the time of the mid-Autumn Festival, Ho wrote to the Children of Vietnam:

My dear nephews and nieces, your parents have brought you so many things... I share your joy and happiness... Because I love you so much, and also because only a year ago our Autumn festival took place when our country was still oppressed and you children still slaves, whereas at this year’s festival, our country is free and you the young masters of an independent country... I have no gifts for you, but only my loving kisses.<sup>55</sup>

---

<sup>51</sup> Steven Saxonberg, *Transitions and Non-Transitions from Communism: Regime Survival in China, Cuba, North Korea, and Vietnam* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 96.

<sup>52</sup> Halberstam, 13.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> William Warbey, *Ho Chi Minh and the Struggle for an Independent Vietnam* (London: Merlin Press, 1972), 104.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 111.

Ho's letter reveals a number of important facts, the first being his dedication to the image as Ho the protector, the Uncle. The intimacy that Ho demonstrated surely resonated with the youth and their parents, as Ho implied that they were of value to him; they were the active members of a free Vietnam. Ho also attempted to connect with the children on an emotional level, explaining that he too experienced their joy. Yet, as is the case with any piece of propaganda, Ho connected his message to his cause. The joy that the children experienced came not from the holiday, but from the new freedom that they experienced as a result of the revolution. Yet, not once did Ho mention communism or military efforts, instead, he chose to emphasize the importance of freedom and his love for his people.

Despite Ho's hard efforts, the unification of the three provinces of Vietnam did not come until 1975, when the war with the Americans came to a close. Yet, to this day, the Vietnamese people recognize Ho's dedication to their welfare. He was a beacon of hope, whose adopted name, Ho Chi Minh, meant "the bringer of light." While some may argue that his desire for communism, a truly foreign ideological model, got in the way of his desire for Vietnamese freedom, a close analysis of his tactics reveal a man who understood that progress could not be achieved immediately and who embraced the communist doctrine because he felt that it most easily blended his own values and the values of the Vietnamese people. In times of need, Ho recognized the necessity of compromise, modification of values, and patience. One may regard Ho Chi Minh in many lights; indeed, one may see him as part nationalist, part Marxist-Leninist, part humanist, and part Confucian. Most importantly, however, Ho was a pragmatist and a realist rather than a theoretical ideologue. Although his revolutionary views were in harmony with Lenin, and later with Mao and often counter to those of Stalin, he was more committed to the freeing of his country from foreign domination than he was of maintaining Marxist purity. In

forming the Youth Revolutionary League, the Indochinese Communist Party, and the Viet Minh Front, Ho encouraged the formation of a broad association of patriots. These groups were created not to promote communism or to paint the picture of a prophetic leader, but instead to set Vietnam on the path to freedom. Following the death of Ho Chi Minh in 1969, Vietnam has still not become a truly successful communist nation. Ho's predecessor and ally in the war, Le Duan, in fact, acted antithetically to Ho, pushing for the immediate, rather than gradual, implementation of communist programs in the country.<sup>56</sup> He did so in honor of Ho's legacy, but his rashness did more than good, severely affecting a very war-weary population.<sup>57</sup> The Vietnam that Ho conceived of does not exist today, and the country has become increasingly capitalist. Yet Ho's legacy is not lost, it is ingrained in the hearts of the Vietnamese, just as the Confucian values were when Ho began his quest. In almost every store, home, or garden, an allusion to the beloved Ho can be found, the Uncle who freed his people from colonialism and restored their dignity. However, Ho's legacy also extends outside of Vietnam. His success in the revolution demonstrates the necessity of a leader that compromises, honors cultural values and traditions, and also holds the ideals of nationalism above ideological purity.

---

<sup>56</sup> Duiker, 567.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

## Bibliography

- Brocheux, Pierre. *Ho Chi Minh: A Biography*. Translated by Claire Duiker. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Cliff, Tony. "Marxism and the Collectivisation of Agriculture, Part 1." Marxist Internet Archive. Last modified October 18, 2002. <http://www.marxists.org/archive/cliff/works/1964/xx/collect1.htm>.
- Duiker, William J. *Ho Chi Minh: A Life*. New York: Hyperion, 2000.
- Dunn, John. *Modern Revolutions: An Introduction to the Analysis of a Political Phenomenon*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.
- Fischer, Ruth. "Ho Chi Minh: Disciplined Communist." *Foreign Affairs*, 23, no. 1 (1954): 86-97. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20031077>.
- Fitzgerald, Frances. *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2002.
- Halberstam, David. *Ho*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007.
- Lacouture, Jean. *Ho Chi Minh: A Political Biography*. Translated by Peter Wiles. Edited by Jane Clark Seitz. New York: Random House, 1968.
- McAlister, John T. Jr., and Paul Mus. *The Vietnamese and Their Revolution*. New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1970.
- Minh, Ho Chi. *Ho Chi Minh on Revolution: Selected Writings, 1920-66*. Edited by Bernard B. Fall. New York: Signet Books, 1968.
- Moise, Edwin E. "The Vietnam Wars: Background." *Clemson University*. November 4, 1998. <http://www.clemson.edu/caah/history/FacultyPages/EdMoise/viet1.html>.
- Moise, Edwin E. "The Vietnam Wars: The Emergence of the Viet Minh." *Clemson University*. November 4, 1998. <http://www.clemson.edu/caah/history/FacultyPages/EdMoise/viet2.html>.
- Sacks, Milton. "The Strategy of Communism in Southeast Asia." *Pacific Affairs*, 23, no. 3 (1950): 227-247. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3035095>.
- Saxonberg, Steven. *Transitions and Non-Transitions from Communism: Regime Survival in China, Cuba, North Korea, and Vietnam*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

Vien, Nguyen Khac. *Tradition and Revolution in Vietnam*. Translated by Linda Yarr, Jayne Werner, and Tran Tuong Nhu. Berkeley: Indochina Resource Center, 1974.

Warbey, William. *Ho Chi Minh and the Struggle for an Independent Vietnam*. London: Merlin Press, 1972.