

Eternal War

The Vietnamese Heritage

Vietnam is nobody's dog.

—Nguyen Co Thach, 1978

The Trung Sisters

Today, nearly two thousand years after their deaths, the sisters Trung—Trung Trac and Trung Nhi—flourish in the collective memory of the Vietnamese people, fill revered pages in the histories of Vietnam, and represent the earliest expression of Vietnamese nationalism. In A.D. 40, they rebelled against To Dinh, the brutal Chinese governor of northern Vietnam. For three centuries, Chinese colonialists had ruled Vietnam with a heavy hand, and Vietnamese alienation deepened. Trung Trac's husband, Thi Sach, enjoyed a reputation for resisting Chinese dictates, and when To Dinh had him assassinated, Trung Trac and Trung Nhi hoisted the banner of national liberation. Committed to removing the yoke of Chinese oppression, they assembled and then led a Vietnamese army against To Dinh's forces, swiftly liberating sixty-five towns and proclaiming independence. Chinese troops fled for their lives, escaping to the north and across the border. A grateful nation, according to popular Vietnamese historians, acknowledged Trung Trac as sovereign and proclaimed her queen of Vietnam.

The Chinese emperor, loath to suffer such an irksome political entity on its southern frontier, soon made short work of the uprising. In 42 B.C., the Chinese army returned in force. The Trungs tried to resist, but the Chinese enemy, superior in numbers, organization, and equipment, soon overwhelmed the insurgents, driving them deep into Vietnam and

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trapping the Trung sisters against the Day River. Unable to escape the onslaught, Trun Trac and Trung Nhi swam into the current and drowned, committing suicide on their own terms rather than acquiescing to the hated Chinese. Some Vietnamese legends still deny the suicide and portray the Trung sisters as heroines morphing into mist and ascending to heaven for deification.

Ever since, the Vietnamese have lionized the Trung sisters. More than four centuries ago, paper prints began depicting them as warriors with yellow turbans, riding astride elephants and leading soldiers into battle. Every spring, the residents of Hanoi celebrate the lives of the Trung sisters and their role in fashioning Vietnamese identity. On birthdays and special events, Vietnamese parents, grandparents, and teachers still bestow Trung sister memorabilia—books, pamphlets, jewelry, and sketches—on children as rewards for achievement. Today, larger temples and smaller shrines honoring the sisters draw visitors and worshipers throughout Vietnam. The festivities often include soldiers, bands, weapons, yellow turbans, and flags. During the Vietnam War, it was not uncommon for American soldiers and marines, upon examining the bodies of deceased Vietcong or North Vietnamese regulars, to come upon a necklace or trinket dedicated to the Trung sisters, who first transformed Vietnamese nationalism into a military phenomenon and in whose memory soldiers still train and fight.

In 1945, Ho Chi Minh, the leader of Vietnamese communists, launched a bloody insurrection against the French colonial government and appealed to Moscow for assistance. Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin, convinced that Indochina constituted, at best, only a backwater in the looming Cold War, discarded the request, failing even to acknowledge Ho's cables. Four years later, however, once Mao Zedong and the communists had seized control of China and then deployed large numbers of People's Liberation Army soldiers to the border of Vietnam, Stalin took notice. On February 16, 1950, he hosted a dinner for Mao in Moscow and invited Ho Chi Minh to attend. The Soviet leader there and then conceded to Mao financial and strategic responsibility over Vietnam, a decision that Ho found particularly unsettling. In his struggle against the French colonialists, Ho had planned to leverage the traditional Sino-Russian (Soviet) rivalry, hoping to play Stalin off against Mao and in the process squeeze more financial and military assistance from both.

Stalin put Mao and Ho on the same train for the journey back to Beijing, and with each mile of track traversed, Ho's misgivings deepened. Mao at once seemed congenial and menacing, bellicose and accommodating, certainly a man to be used but never trusted and one guaranteed to press every possible advantage. For millennia China had done just that with Vietnam;

Ho stood wary of the behemoth to Vietnam's north. China represented an iron fist clothed in a silk glove.

Ho was a wisp of a man, thin and gaunt, frail and seemingly vulnerable, his stringy goatee elongating an already long face. After seventy-six years of world wandering, hiding, and escaping, he was finally declining, wrinkled brown skin now only translucently covering his bones. Over the years his rivals might easily have failed fully to recognize the fire that possessed him. In 1966 Ho Chi Minh was ill, and he calmly waited for eternal rest from a life of boundless striving. It was his peculiar lot that two enemy nations had drawn his very qualified admiration. A lover of much of French culture, he had led Vietnam in a war of national liberation against France, at one point adopting, in a vain hope to get American support, a close version of the American Declaration of Independence. Now that country was his antagonist.

Late in 1966, when the war in Vietnam approached its peak, Ho remarked to Jean Sainteny, an old French diplomat and friend: "The Americans . . . can wipe out all the principal towns of Tonkin [northern Vietnam]. . . . We expect it, and, besides, we are prepared for it. But that does not weaken our determination to fight to the very end. You know, we've already had the experience, and you have seen how that conflict ended." It was only a matter of time before the Americans went the same way as the Chinese, Japanese, and French. Vietnam was for the Vietnamese, not for anyone else, and that passion had driven Ho Chi Minh throughout his life.

That key to Ho's passion is the fundamental theme of Vietnamese history. Long ago a Chinese historian remarked, "The people of Vietnam do not like the past." No wonder. Vietnam developed in the shadow of Chinese imperialism. In 208 B.C. the Han dynasty expanded into southern China and Vietnam, declaring the region a new Chinese province—Giao Chi. Its informal name for the region was Nam Viet, which meant "land of the southern Viets." Over the centuries the Chinese brought to Vietnam their mandarin administrative system, along with their technology, writing, and Confucian social philosophy. But control did not translate into assimilation. Intensely ethnocentric, the Vietnamese, while welcoming many Chinese institutions, refused to accept a Chinese identity. The historian Frances FitzGerald describes that dilemma in Vietnamese history: "The Vietnamese leaders assumed Chinese political culture while rejecting . . . Chinese political domination."

Periodically, the Vietnamese violently resisted, giving Vietnam such national heroes as the Trung sisters; Trieu Au, the Vietnamese Joan of Arc who led a rebellion in A.D. 248; and Ngo Quyen, the military leader of Vietnam's successful revolution in 938. An old Vietnamese proverb captures the region's history: "Vietnam is too close to China, too far from heaven." Even after they achieved independence in 938, the Vietnamese had to deal periodically with Chinese or Mongol expansionism. Vietnam fought major wars against invaders from the north in 1257, the 1280s, 1406–1428, and 1788. Tran Hung Dao, the great thirteenth-century Vietnamese general, defeated

the enemy after having all his soldiers tattoo the inscription “Kill the Mongols” on their right arm. He wrote: “We have seen the enemy’s ambassadors stroll about in our streets with conceit. . . . They have demanded precious stones and embroidered silks to satisfy their boundless appetite. . . . They have extracted silver and gold from our limited treasures. It is really not different from bringing meat to feed hungry tigers.”

In the centuries-long struggle against China, Vietnam developed a hero cult that elevated martial qualities as primary virtues. Vietnamese art glorified the sword-wielding, armor-bearing soldiers riding horses or elephants into battle. War, not peace, was woven into the cloth of Vietnamese history. The historian William Turley writes that out of this experience the Vietnamese fashioned a myth of national indomitability. . . . The Vietnamese forged a strong collective identity . . . long before the Europeans appeared off their shores.” Vietnam’s enemies learned that lesson the hard way.

But there was also a patience to Vietnamese militarism, an unwillingness to be intimidated, a conviction that a small country could prevail against an empire if it bided its time and waited for its moment. Between 1406 and 1428, led by the great Le Loi, the Vietnamese attacked the Chinese through hit-and-run guerrilla warfare, letting rugged mountains and thick rain forests do much of their work for them, wearing down the enemy, sapping its spirit, confusing its objectives, finally delivering a death blow, a strategic offensive to drive the Chinese back across the border. That story became legendary in Vietnamese military history.

Anti-Chinese resistance became the cutting edge of Vietnamese identity. A prominent eighteenth-century Chinese emperor lamented the stubbornness of the Vietnamese. They are not, he said, “a reliable people. An occupation does not last very long before they raise their arms against us and expel us from their country.” Suspicion of the Chinese permeated Vietnamese history. In 1945, for example, with the French ready to return to Vietnam and Chinese troops occupying much of northern Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh agreed to cooperate temporarily with France. When some of his colleagues protested, Ho remarked that it “is better to sniff French shit for a while than to eat Chinese shit all our lives.”

For Ho Chi Minh, the “French shit” was still bad enough. France had come to Vietnam in two stages, first in the seventeenth century and again in the nineteenth. Father Alexandre de Rhodes, a French Jesuit, traveled to Hanoi in 1627, converted thousands of Vietnamese to Roman Catholicism, and created a Latin alphabet for the Vietnamese language. Although suspicious Vietnamese leaders expelled de Rhodes in 1630 and again in 1645, he planted the seeds of the French empire. The French returned in force to Vietnam in 1847 when a naval expedition arrived at Tourane (later called Danang) and, within a few weeks, fought a pitched battle with local Vietnamese. Two more French warships fought another battle at Tourane in 1856. A French fleet captured Tourane in 1858 and conquered Saigon in 1859. Vietnamese resistance drove the French out, but in 1861 they returned

to Saigon to stay. After signing a treaty with Siam (now Thailand) in 1863, France established a protectorate over Cambodia. France extended its control over southern Vietnam, or Cochin China, during the rest of the decade. France then turned north, and in 1883 a naval expedition reached the mouth of the Perfume River, just outside Hue. When the French fleet shelled the city, a Vietnamese leader gave France a protectorate over Annam (central Vietnam) and Tonkin (northern Vietnam), although it took France years to assert its control in those regions. To provide uniform government over the colonies, France established the French Union in 1887. After securing a protectorate over Laos by signing another treaty with Siam in 1893, France had five regions in the Union: Cochin China, Annam, Tonkin, Cambodia, and Laos.

The Vietnamese were no more satisfied with French domination than with Chinese. The most resentful Vietnamese lived in Nghe An Province, located in Annam in central Vietnam, a low coastal plain bordered by the Annamese mountains. Nghe An and the surrounding provinces were the most densely populated areas of Vietnam, and by far the poorest. The soil was leached and dry, the weather alternating between torrential monsoon rains and hot summer winds.

The French called the Nghe Annese the “Buffaloes of Nghe An” because of their reputation for stubbornness. The Vietnamese referred to them as the “People of the Wooden Fish.” The Vietnamese love a special sauce known as *nuoc mam*. They alternate layers of fish and layers of salt in a barrel and let the brew ferment in the heat for several weeks. The fish decompose into a mush and the fluid into a salty brine. *Nuoc mam* is to Vietnamese fish what catsup is to American french fries. The Nghe Annese were too poor to afford fish, the proverb says, so they carried a wooden fish in their pockets to dip into *nuoc mam* at restaurants. Nghe Annese, the jesters claimed, licked the wooden fish until they were kicked out, only to repeat the culinary charade somewhere else.

But Nghe An, with its neighboring Ha Tinh Province, was not known only for its poverty. Year after year the prizewinning poets, musicians, and scholars at the imperial court at Hue came from Nghe An and Ha Tinh. They were thinkers and tinkerers, creative people who looked at life from unique perspectives, refused to believe what they were told, and insisted on having things proven to them. Their skepticism bred unhappiness. By the 1800s the best schools at Hue no longer accepted applicants from Nghe An and Ha Tinh, no matter how high their scores. Central Vietnamese, “the people of the wooden fish,” were troublemakers, dreaming of a better world.

Born in 1890 as Nguyen Sinh Cung, Ho Chi Minh grew up in Nghe An. Near his birthplace was the *den*, a monument to Le Loi. The Vietnamese believe that the spirit of an honored individual lives on in a *den*. Ho Chi Minh visited the *den* as a child and listened to tales of how Le Loi had expelled the hated Chinese. His father, Nguyen Sinh Sac, was the son of peasants who became a scholar and a ferocious anti-French nationalist. His sister was a renowned balladeer, and her folk songs railed at China and

France. Sac passed the mandarin examinations and found a job at the imperial palace at Hue, but the imperial court was full of pro-French Vietnamese sycophants or tradition-bound mandarins. For a while in the late 1890s and early 1900s Nguyen Sinh Sac was a minor government official in Hue. Ho Chi Minh's mother died in 1900, and Sac, along with his two sons and a daughter, lived in a tiny, dingy one-room apartment facing the opulent splendor of the Palais de la Censure where the Vietnamese emperor and the mandarin court ruled Vietnam. Ho bore the brunt of ridicule from the children of the court mandarins, and he developed a spontaneous dislike for intellectual snobbery. Throughout his life, he frequently quoted the poet Tuy Vien: "Nothing is more contemptible than to seek honors through literature."

Although the Vietnamese had thrown off the Chinese yoke in 938, over the centuries they gradually adopted the Chinese mandarin system to govern the nation. Eventually, mandarin teachers and bureaucrats became a self-conscious elite. To pass the civil service examinations and secure the best jobs, Vietnamese scholars immersed themselves in the Chinese language and Confucian values, which gradually distanced them from Vietnamese peasants. The mandarins also adopted many Chinese institutions—a centralized tax system, a judicial hierarchy, and the royal palace architecture complete with gates, moats, bridges, and pools. Confucianism promoted rule by a paternalistic elite committed to morality and fairness, and it demanded unswerving obedience from the governed. The essence of personal behavior is obedience, submissiveness, and peaceful acquiescence in the social hierarchy.

The mandarin system was also conservative to a fault. Mandarins were suspicious of all change. They opposed science, technology, industrialization, and democracy, any one of which might dislodge them from their positions of privilege. A popular late nineteenth-century Vietnamese poem reflected the growing resentment of the mandarin class:

Becoming a mandarin you treat your servants as dirt,
And steal every bit of money the people have.
Although you scoop in who knows how much money,
Do the people get any help from you?

On top of the mandarin elite, the French imposed the colonial bureaucracy. They ruled Vietnam through local clients—French-speaking Roman Catholic Vietnamese, who soon became a new elite, competing with the mandarins for influence. Eventually, the French abolished the mandarin examinations, prohibited the teaching of Chinese, and displaced the mandarins as power-brokers. Except for the French bureaucrats themselves, the Francophile Vietnamese enjoyed the finest homes, the best jobs, the fanciest clothes—the good life.

The imposition of the French language and French law accelerated the alienation of peasant land. There were widespread poverty and millions of landless peasants in Vietnam before the French, but most peasants owned at

least a small plot, and historically the emperor had discouraged the development of large estates. But between 1880 and 1930 the French changed land-holding patterns. Many peasants lost their property because they could not pay high French taxes, could not contest claims against the land in French courts, or fell into debt to French or Vietnamese creditors who foreclosed on their property. The number of landless peasants, tenant farmers, and debt peons rose. In Tonkin nine percent of the population came to own 52 percent of cultivated land, and 250 people owned 20 percent. They included French settlers and wealthy Vietnamese. It was the same in Cochin China. Tenant farmers paid up to 70 percent of their harvest to the landlord, and farmers borrowing money to finance production on their own land paid interest rates of 100 percent. French companies had monopolies on the production of alcohol, opium, and salt, robbing peasant farmers of another source of income.

With imported rubber trees, the French created a new industry. By 1940 there were more than six hundred rubber plantations in Vietnam, but a handful of French companies controlled them. Poverty forced thousands of Vietnamese peasants to leave home for years to work the French plantations. The taxes imposed by the top-heavy French bureaucracy added to the poverty. "French imperialism," Ho Chi Minh declared in 1920, "conquered our country with bayonets. Since then we have not only been oppressed and exploited shamelessly, but also tortured and poisoned pitilessly. . . . Prisons outnumber schools and are always overcrowded. . . . Thousands of Vietnamese have been led to a slow death or massacred." Though not so eloquent, millions of Vietnamese felt the same way. To them France was a nation of police, soldiers, pimps, tax collectors, and labor recruiters.

Almost as bad was the Vietnamese elite who did the French bidding. For any Vietnamese to succeed in the French colony, he or she had to be a French-speaking Roman Catholic who carried out the edicts of the empire. If these Vietnamese were not mandarins in their educational background, they were just as elitist, just as hierarchical, and just as conservative. They got the best government posts, the finest homes, and the largest estates. Ho Chi Minh referred to them as *colonis indigeniae* [indigenous colonists]: "If you take the largest and strongest member of the herd and fasten a bright substance to its neck, a gold coin or a cross, it becomes completely docile. . . . This weird . . . animal goes by the name of *colonis indigeniae*, but depending on its habitat it is referred to as Annamese, Madagascan, Algerian, Indian."

Nguyen Sinh Sac's job at the imperial court had given him a living but no dignity. Indeed, he came to view the post as a dishonor. "Being a mandarin," he said many times, "is the ultimate form of slavery." Sac refused to let Ho Chi Minh even study for the examinations. He refused to speak French, arguing that doing so "would corrupt my Vietnamese," and openly advocated the abolition of the mandarin class and the disintegration of the French empire. Nguyen Sinh Sac was one of Nghe An's most troublesome children. The French fired him.

The father passed on those passions to his children. His daughter Nguyen Thanh worked in Vinh supervising a French military mess hall and smuggled rifles and ammunition to the De Tham guerrillas, a group already fighting against the French. When French police convicted her of treason, the mandarin judge gave her a life sentence and an epitaph: “Other women bring forth children, you bring forth rifles.” Her brother Nguyen Khiem was just as militant. He repeatedly wrote eloquent letters to French officials protesting Vietnamese poverty and calling for freedom. But it was the other son—Nguyen Sinh Cung, later known as Ho Chi Minh—who realized Sac’s dream.

At five years old, Ho was running messages back and forth to members of the anti-French underground. The house was a beehive of political talk, always around the theme of Vietnamese independence. A frequent visitor, and occasional fugitive, was Phan Boi Chau, the most prominent of Vietnam’s early nationalists. Among other acquaintances of Nguyen Sinh Sac was Phan Chu Trinh, the constitutionalist who wanted to overthrow the mandarin bureaucracy.

The Nguyen Sinh Sac family was also a “brown canvas” household. The traditional dress of the Vietnamese was the *ao dai*, the *non*, and the *quoc*. For women, the *ao dai* was a long dress worn over black or white trousers that fit loosely around the legs. A rectangular piece of material formed a panel reaching down from the waist in the front and the back. For men the dress was only knee length. The embroidery on the cloth indicated the station in life of the wearer. Gold brocade was reserved for the imperial family. High-ranking mandarins used purple embroidery, and low-ranking mandarins used blue. Peasants could have only the plainest cloth. Radicals adopted brown canvas clothes as a symbolic protest against mandarin authority and a gesture to blur class lines. By the late 1880s large numbers of men in Nghe An wore brown canvas, in spite of mandarin edicts to the contrary. For much of his life Ho Chi Minh wore brown canvas clothes except at the most formal occasions.

Long before Ho Chi Minh ever heard of Karl Marx and communism, he viewed society through the lens of class conflict, a philosophical inheritance from an egalitarian family. Years later, *The Communist Manifesto* resonated with Ho Chi Minh, fitting nicely into an intellectual schema decades in the making. When the time came for Ho Chi Minh to become a communist, he played the role enthusiastically.

Phan Boi Chau, a nationalist whose ideas formed much of the discussion in the household, had been born in Nghe An in 1867. His father, though passing the mandarin examinations, refused to work for the government, becoming a teacher in a small village. Phan Boi Chau joined the Scholars’ Revolt in 1885, a resistance movement of Vietnam’s emperor Ham Nghi and a number of mandarin officials against French rule. In 1893 he participated in Phan Dinh Phung’s unsuccessful Nghe Tinh uprising against the French.

By the early 1900s Phan Boi Chau was convinced that Vietnam could enter the modern world only if the French were expelled from Indochina. For a

teenaged Ho Chi Minh, Phan Boi Chau must have been an imposing figure. Phan Boi Chau's round face and wire-rimmed spectacles gave him a scholarly, almost mandarin look, as did the full goatee. But he was no simple scholar. He was a man of intense passion and commitment. "The French," he said, "treat our people like garbage. . . . The meek are made into slaves, the strong-minded are thrown into jail. The physically powerful are forced into the army, while the old and weak are left to die. . . . The land is splashed with blood." There was also an ascetic look to Phan Boi Chau, as if he had transcended mundane pursuits for a grander cause. If Vietnam was to flower, France must fall.

In 1907, a few years after visiting with the family of Nguyen Sinh Sac, Phan Boi Chau led the abortive Poison Plot, in which low-ranking Vietnamese soldiers tried to poison French officers in Hanoi. The conspiracy was uncovered before it took too large a toll, but Phan Boi Chau became known as the first violent revolutionary in modern Vietnam. He spent years moving about in Japan, China, and Siam, with French police always on his trail. The Chinese arrested him in Shanghai in 1913. He was released from prison in 1917 and spent the rest of his life in China. He died there in 1940.

As a nationalist, Phan Boi Chau was rivaled only by Phan Chu Trinh, another Nghe Anness. Born to a well-to-do family in 1872, Phan Chu Trinh passed the mandarin examinations. A meeting in 1903 with Phan Boi Chau changed his life. Phan Chu Trinh resigned his government post two years later, convinced that the Vietnamese emperor and his mandarin "lackeys" would doom Vietnam to oblivion. But he parted company with Phan Boi Chau on two counts: Phan Chu Trinh did not believe in radical violence, and he was convinced that the imperial court and mandarin bureaucracy, not the French empire, should be destroyed first. He wanted to work with the French in replacing the mandarins with a modern, democratic political and educational system.

Although neither Phan Boi Chau nor Phan Chu Trinh was able to implement his ideas in the early 1900s, they left a rich legacy. From Phan Boi Chau came the conviction that only revolutionary violence would dislodge the French, and from Phan Chu Trinh came the certainty that the mandarin system was rotten, corrupted by its elitism and its hostility to the modern world and its technology. Ho Chi Minh would eventually have to decide which to destroy first—the French empire or the mandarin court—but by the time he was a young man he already knew his destiny. Nghe An had produced yet another radical.

Ho Chi Minh left Nghe An Province at the end of 1910. He spent nearly a year in Phan Thiet teaching at a school financed by a *nuoc mam* factory. Late in 1911 he headed south to Saigon, where he enrolled in a vocational school, but he was unhappy learning a trade that the French would use only to exploit him. He left school early in 1912, signed up as a mess boy on a French ocean liner, and left Saigon for the other side of the world. Traveling under the alias of "Van Ba," Ho Chi Minh got a glimpse of much of the

world in the next several years. In North Africa he saw what France was doing to the Algerians; in South Africa he noted what the English and the Boers were doing to the blacks; and in other parts of call he observed the imperial rule of the English, French, Dutch, and Portuguese. He worked in New York City, whetting his curiosity about American democracy, and on the eve of World War I, Ho was in London working as a cook at the Carlton Hotel.

Ho Chi Minh moved to Paris in 1918 and quickly immersed himself in anticolonial politics. There were 100,000 Vietnamese in Paris, and Ho found good restaurants in which to eat his favorite dishes. He met the exiled Phan Chu Trinh and listened to him preach against the evils of the Vietnamese imperial court at Hue and the virtues of democracy and industrialization. Ho Chi Minh met frequently with French socialists, pressing them on the question of empire, trying to discern whether they really wanted to change the world. He supported himself by touching up photographs and writing newspaper articles, adopting the name “Nguyen Ai Quoc” (Nguyen the Patriot) or “Nguyen O Phap” (Nguyen Who Hates the French). In the Vietnamese community, Ho became a leading nationalist, and the French secret police kept track of him.

But then overnight, Ho Chi Minh became a genuine hero. At the Paris Peace Conference negotiating the end of World War I, Ho electrified Vietnamese nationalists when he submitted an eight-point set of demands that included Vietnamese representation in the French parliament; freedom of speech, press, and association; release of all political prisoners; and full equality under the law for the Vietnamese in Indochina. If France would not meet those demands, the empire was morally bankrupt and would surely be destroyed. Looking back on that moment in 1919, the Vietnamese student Bui Lam would remember: “It was like a flash of lightning. . . . Here was a Vietnamese insisting that his people be accorded their rights. . . . No two Vietnamese residing in France could meet, after this, without mentioning the name of Nguyen Ai Quoc.”

Ho Chi Minh was soon the soul of the expatriate Vietnamese community. The Vietnamese sought him out, no longer looking to Phan Chu Trinh as their leader. Ho was a charismatic figure. Perhaps it was his combination of revolutionary soul and Confucian personality. His hatred of the French empire knew no bounds, nor did his love for his country. But at the same time Ho Chi Minh was a man of the *luc duc*, the six virtues Confucianism demanded of all leaders: *Tri* (wisdom), *Nhan* (benevolence), *Tim* (sincerity), *Nghia* (righteousness), *Trung* (moderation), and *Hoa* (harmony). He seemed unassuming, a “brown canvas” man from Nghe An.

Paris solidified Ho’s political philosophy. For several years he had been a member of the French Socialist party, but he grew weary of its unwillingness to do anything more than sympathize on the “colonial question.” Ho Chi Minh decided the socialists were “capitalist souls in syndicalist bodies,” too given to parliamentary debate, political compromise, and intellectual mod-

eration to help the Vietnamese. His decision in 1920 to part company with the socialists left him with the problem of finding the real key to Vietnamese liberation. Along with a large faction of French socialists, he decided in 1920 to convert the organization into a French Communist party. His conversion came when a French communist gave him a copy of Vladimir Lenin's "Thesis on the National and Colonial Questions." Lenin argued that imperialism was the natural consequence of capitalism. Industrial monopolies, to secure new sources of raw materials and new markets, expand into the under-developed world and exploit colonial peoples. The imperial powers enrich themselves by pushing the colonies into poverty. But alongside Western imperialists, Lenin named another enemy: Asian feudalists. A tiny minority of Asian natives, protected by European technology, controlled enormous economic assets, intensifying the suffering of peasants and workers. Revolution was the answer. Throw off the imperial yoke and redistribute property to the peasant masses.

Ho's introduction to Leninism was electrifying. "What emotion, enthusiasm, clear-sightedness and confidence it instilled in me! I was overjoyed. Though sitting alone in my room I shouted aloud as if addressing large crowds: 'Dear martyrs, compatriots! This is what we need, this is our path to liberation.'" Here was the solution to the long debate between Phan Boi Chau and Phan Chu Trinh. In the name of Phan Boi Chau, the people of Vietnam must destroy the French colonial apparatus, and in the name of Phan Chu Trinh they must promote revolution in Vietnam, wiping out the last vestiges of mandarin elitism and stripping wealthy, Francophile Vietnamese of their huge estates.

After years of searching, Ho Chi Minh had an ideology to match his passion. In later years, people would debate which was his true love, nationalism or communism? In the United States, anticommunists would see only his communism, arguing that nationalism was just a subterfuge. Antiwar critics, on the other hand, claimed that deep down Ho was a nationalist, that communism was simply the most effective tool for bringing about independence. Ho hated the French empire for what it had done to his country, but he also hated the French-speaking Vietnamese Catholics who enriched themselves at the expense of poor peasants. Ho Chi Minh was a devout communist because in communism he saw the resolution of both evils. Communism fit the hand of Nghe Anese radicalism like a glove.

Ho Chi Minh's conversion to communism transformed his life. He was a founding member of the French Communist party, and in 1921 he established the Intercolonial Union, a communist-front group to work against imperialism. He spent 1923 and 1924 in Moscow. Late in 1924 the Soviet leadership asked him to go to Canton as an adviser to the Soviet envoy. There Ho discovered a large Vietnamese expatriate community coalescing around Phan Boi Chau, the old family friend. But the joy of the reunion was short-lived. Ho Chi Minh talked at length about revolution, but Phan Boi Chau's commitment stopped at talk. Perhaps he was just too old—the fire had dimmed.

Ho also found him conservative, willing to get rid of the French but not the Vietnamese elite in a genuine revolution.

Young Vietnamese nationalists in Canton gravitated to Ho Chi Minh's leadership. One of them was Pham Van Dong. Born in Quang Nam Province of central Vietnam in 1906 to a mandarin family, Dong had studied at the French lycée in Hue. His father was exiled to the French colony of Reunion in 1915 for fomenting rebellion among the Vietnamese troops recruited to fight in World War I. As a student, Pham Van Dong became intensely anti-French, and he moved to Canton to escape the secret police. With Pham Van Dong, Nguyen Luong Bang, and several other young Vietnamese, Ho Chi Minh founded the Revolutionary Youth League of Vietnam in 1925. It was the first purely Marxist organization among the Indochinese.

French secret agents and Chinese police went after the rebels, and Ho Chi Minh urged his associates to return to Vietnam and organize anti-French communist cells. He went to Moscow in 1927, attended conferences in Europe later in the year, and in 1928 lived in Bangkok as a Buddhist monk organizing the Vietnamese emigrant community. In Moscow, he temporarily ran afoul of Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin, who worried that Ho's sense of nationalism ran deeper than his commitment to communism. Ho traveled to Hong Kong in 1929 and met Le Duc Tho, another Vietnamese nationalist. Tho, who was born in Nam Ha Province in 1910 to a mandarin family, had become an anti-French nationalist while attending school. With Le Duc Tho, Pham Van Dong, Nguyen Luong Bang, and several other Vietnamese in Hong Kong, Ho Chi Minh established the Indochinese Communist party in June 1929. Its leaders wanted to "overthrow French imperialism, feudalism and the reactionary Vietnamese capitalist class." Another young Vietnamese nationalist soon joined them. Vo Nguyen Giap, born in Quang Binh Province in 1912, came from a well-to-do family. He earned a law degree at Hanoi University. By the time he was a teenager, Giap hated the French. Although he had never met Ho Chi Minh, Giap was familiar with his revolutionary nationalism and joined the Indochinese Communist party.

Rebellion commenced in Nghe An. The Great Depression eroded peasant income, creating an epidemic of economic misery and political discontent. Widespread tax revolts erupted spontaneously throughout central Vietnam, and more sporadic eruptions took place in the Mekong Delta. But in Nghe An, radicals organized peasants into Red Soviets—local councils demanding an end to rents, seeking massive tax cuts, and in conformity with communism, striving for land redistribution.

On September 12, 1930, more than 6,000 Nghe An peasants marched on Vinh, the provincial capital. Although the march began as a peaceful demonstration, the French called in an air strike, killing more than 174 people. Later in the day, when relatives drifted in to claim the bodies, aircraft killed another fifteen people. A French journalist called the second attack "an awkward error which had a bad effect." Bad effect, indeed! The repression of the Nghe An Revolt was a seminal event, proof that France would stop

at nothing to keep the empire. For the French, the revolt was sobering testimony to the power of Vietnamese peasants if anyone organized them. For the mandarins, the revolt signaled their downfall if communists ever took over. The “Vietnamese reactionary class,” as Ho described them, would lose everything.

But the collapse of the Nghe An Revolt taught Ho Chi Minh and his followers another lesson. Nobody would overthrow the French empire without first creating a broad-based political organization reaching all the way down to the peasant masses. As far back as 1924, Ho had said that in “all the French colonies . . . conditions have combined to further an uprising of the peasants. Here and there they have rebelled, but their rebellions have been drowned in blood. If the peasants remain pacific today it is because they lack organization and a leader.” Revolution depended on the support of millions of peasants. Success in Vietnam would be more a political than a military question.

After the suppression of the Nghe An Revolt, the French went after all revolutionary nationalists. Pham Van Dong was arrested in 1930 and sent to the dreaded “tiger cages” at Con Son Island, where he spent the next eight years. Le Duc Tho spent years in hiding and in French jails during the 1930s.

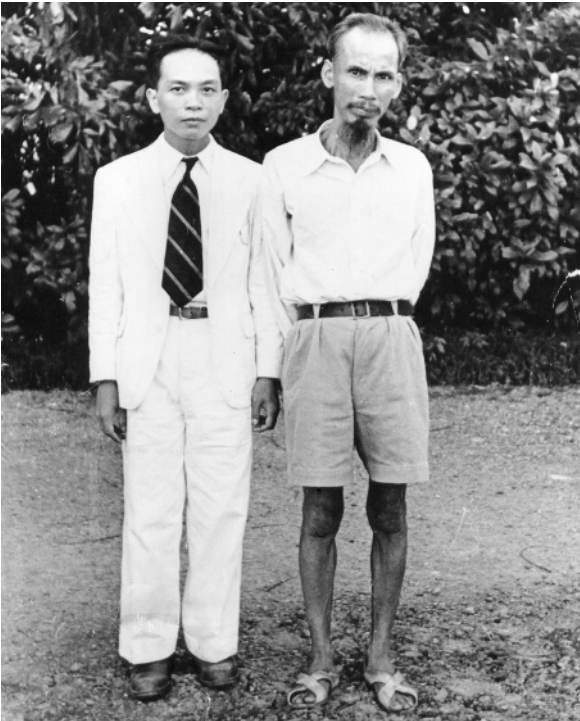


Figure 1.1 September 1945—Ho Chi Minh, right, poses with Vo Nguyen Giap, minister of the Interior in Ho Chi Minh’s provisional government. Giap led the Vietminh and North Vietnamese military through the fall of Saigon. (Courtesy, AP/Wide World Photos.)

Vo Nguyen Giap went into exile in 1939, but the French arrested his wife and baby. Both died in prison in 1941, giving Giap a vendetta to accompany his nationalism. The French tried Ho *in absentia*, convicted him of treason, and sentenced him to death. Under pressure from the French, British authorities imprisoned him in Hong Kong. Rumors quickly spread that he had died there, a story both the French and the Soviet Union believed.

But late in 1932 some British contacts smuggled Ho Chi Minh out of Hong Kong and drove him to Shanghai, where he met with Soviet officials who helped him get to Moscow in 1933. Five years later, Ho Chi Minh returned to China, and the next year he met Vo Nguyen Giap for the first time. Pham Van Dong made it out of the French prison in 1939 and headed for China as well. There the three planned their next move, hoping that the turmoil in the world would provide them with an opportunity. It came in June 1940 when Germany conquered France. Nazi successes fit in well with Japan's designs for Asia. Indochina seemed like a ripe plum, and Japan picked it. In September 1940 Japanese troops moved south out of China into Tonkin. They occupied the rest of Annam and Cochin China by July 1941. Ho now faced another foreign power. He quietly left China and returned to Vietnam. His thirty-year odyssey was over.

When Ho Chi Minh and his followers took up refuge in a limestone cave near Pac Bo in the mountains of Cao Bang Province, he was beginning one more in a long series of anti-imperialist uprisings. The Can Vuong movement of the late 1800s had demanded restoration of Vietnamese royalty, but in doing so it did not address the resentments of the peasant masses for the mandarin elite. Phan Boi Chau and Phan Chu Trinh tried but failed; their isolated, poorly planned uprisings were easy prey for the efficient French colonial administrators. Phan Boi Chau's close associate Hoang Hoa Tham organized the De Tham war against the French in a poorly structured effort that ended with Hoang Hoa Tham's assassination in 1913. Nguyen Thai Hoc established the Viet Nam Quoc Dan Dang, or Vietnam Nationalist party, in 1929 and launched an abortive uprising against the French at Yen Bay, but the movement, composed exclusively of middle- and upper-class Vietnamese, disintegrated. Nguyen Thai Hoc died at the guillotine in 1930.

Ho Chi Minh remembered Lenin's advice that Asian communists should form alliances with each nationalist organization while keeping their independence from all of them. Ho downplayed communism, not wanting to give his French critics anything to use against him. The organization to liberate Vietnam had to be based on nationalism, not revolution, at least in the beginning. Only then was there any hope of bringing together large numbers of Vietnamese in a resistance movement. In May 1941, outside the cave in Cao Bang Province, Ho established the political organization for implementing his dream: the Viet Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh, or Vietminh—the League for Vietnamese Independence. Ho Chi Minh declared: "Our people suffer under a double yoke: they serve not only as buffaloes and horses to the French invaders but also as slaves to the Japanese plunderers. . . . Rich people, sol-

diers, workers, peasants, intellectuals, employees, traders, youth, and women who warmly love your country. . . . Let us unite together!”

Like George Washington, whose towering presence held together competing interests in the fledgling United States of the 1790s, Ho became an iconic figure, a charismatic presence whose personality and image attracted Vietnamese nationalists of every sort. To make sure that he kept the loyalties of middle-class and upper-class Vietnamese nationalists, he soft-peddled his communist credentials, prompting many Americans to conclude that he was more nationalist than communist. Ho Chi Minh was both, devoting fervor to each.

Shortly after the formation of the Vietminh, Ho Chi Minh went back to China to seek assistance from Jiang Jieshi in fighting the Japanese. Just before leaving, Ho Chi Minh announced to his closest associates that he was changing his name from Nguyen Ai Quoc, by which he had been known among Vietnamese nationalists for more than thirty years, to “Ho Chi Minh” (He Who Enlightens). In China, Jiang Jieshi had Ho arrested, and he spent more than a year in prison, almost dying from the conditions. He was released late in 1943 when some Chinese leaders decided he might be useful after all in fighting Japan. Ho Chi Minh returned to Cao Bang Province.

The treachery he experienced at the hands of Jieng Jieshi sent Ho Chi Minh directly into the embrace of Mao Zedong and the Chinese Communist party. Even though the Soviet Union, in order to expedite its war in East Asia against Japan, tried to exploit rivalries between Chinese nationalists and Chinese communists, Ho negotiated an independent course, making sure to offend neither Mao nor Stalin.

By that time Ho Chi Minh was ready to look to a new source for assistance. Ever since his visit to New York City in 1913, he had a bemused curiosity about the United States. Although American capitalism created classes and exploited the poor, there was nevertheless a powerful sense of opportunity there. The Americans had, after all, been the first colony to revolt successfully against a European imperial power, and their Declaration of Independence eloquently proclaimed human equality. American imperialism was even more intriguing. The United States had acquired the Philippines in 1898 and then fought a bloody war against Filipino insurrectionists who had no interest in replacing their Spanish yoke with an American one. American troops crushed the rebellion, but not before a guerrilla war took thousands of lives. Afterwards the Americans made good on their promise. The Tydings-McDuffie Act of 1934 launched the Philippines on the road to independence, with a twelve-year timetable before the American withdrawal. Maybe the Americans were as good as their Declaration of Independence proclaimed?

Ho Chi Minh had no illusions about why the Americans might be willing to help him. They opposed Japan’s expansion into Indochina in 1940 and 1941 not because of any sympathy with the national aspirations of the Vietnamese. Instead, the United States had been worried about its own access to the French rubber plantations, about British and Dutch oil reserves in Malaya

and the East Indies, about the future of the Philippine Islands, and about the fate of the Open Door policy in China. But Ho thought that perhaps the Americans might be willing, if not to liberate Vietnam from the French, at least to help expel the Japanese invaders.

Because France, Great Britain, the United States, and China were allies during World War II, Ho had learned of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's growing disgust with the treatment that France and Great Britain meted out to their colonial subjects. Cultural arrogance, political domination, and economic exploitation characterized the imperial relationship, and in addition to such moral misgivings, Roosevelt harbored serious doubts about whether postwar Britain and France, already hemorrhaging assets and surviving only with American transfusions, would be able to muster the economic resources and the political will to reconquer their colonies in South Asia and Southeast Asia. Roosevelt was tinkering, over the vehement protests of Charles de Gaulle and Winston Churchill, with the idea of backing independence for India, Pakistan, Burma, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, British Malaya, and the Dutch East Indies, just as he had done for the Philippines.

So Ho Chi Minh sought American assistance. The Office of Strategic Services (OSS), forerunner of the Central Intelligence Agency, wanted to develop good intelligence sources in Southeast Asia. Ho made himself available, promising to return downed American fliers and escaped prisoners of war as well as provide information on Japanese troop movements. He wanted arms shipments, first to fight the Japanese and then the French. After securing a promise that the weapons would be used against the Japanese and not the French, the OSS airlifted 5,000 guns to the Vietminh. The OSS agent who brought the guns found Ho Chi Minh "an awfully sweet old guy. If I had to pick out one quality about that little old man sitting on his hill in the jungle, it was his sweetness."

Steely resolve undergirded the sweetness, and Ho Chi Minh's associates shared it. Vo Nguyen Giap, the lawyer and history teacher turned revolutionary, emerged as a brilliant military tactician, and from that mountain cave he expanded Vietminh power into the other northern provinces. By 1945 the Vietminh exercised widespread authority in Cao Bang, Phong Tho, Ha Giang, Yen Bay, Tuyen Quang, and Bac Kan provinces. Ho, not France or Japan, ran those provinces. Pham Van Dong led the effort to recruit more peasant soldiers into the Vietminh, and on several occasions whole garrisons deserted the French and came over.

By the spring of 1945, Giap was itching for a large-scale military effort. Ho Chi Minh, gifted with an uncanny sense of timing, was more cautious. The Vietminh should stay with their guerrilla tactics, attacking French and Japanese forces only when victory was certain, not taking unnecessary risks. The Vietminh should be, Ho said, "like the elephant and the tiger. When the elephant is strong and rested . . . we will retreat. And if the tiger ever pauses, the elephant will impale him on his mighty tusks. But the tiger will not pause and the elephant will die of exhaustion and loss of blood."

Ho Chi Minh persuaded Giap to continue to fight like a tiger, not like an elephant. A large-scale military confrontation was probably unnecessary anyway. By 1945 the Americans were pounding the last nails into the Nazi coffin in Europe and preparing an invasion of Japan. With the Japanese empire collapsing and the French empire still in limbo, Ho believed that “we will not even need to seize power since there will be no power to seize.” Why waste men and resources in a military escalation when victory was at hand?

Suddenly, in August 1945, after the Americans dropped nuclear weapons on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the war was over. Bao Dai, the last Vietnamese emperor whom Japan recognized as a puppet head of state, tried to assert himself as the leader of the new nation. But on August 17, 1945, when Bao Dai supporters held a rally in Hanoi, 150,000 people showed up, many of them waving Vietminh flags. Soon the Vietminh leaders had the crowd marching through the streets of Hanoi, leaving the court mandarins sitting alone on an empty dais. In Vinh, Hue, Saigon, Haiphong, Danang, and Nha Trang, the Vietminh staged similar people’s rallies.

Two days later, a few thousand Vietminh soldiers took control of Hanoi. Emperor Bao Dai, ensconced in the imperial palace at Hue, sent a message to the French warning them that their return to Vietnam would be doubtful at best in face of “the desire for independence that has been smoldering in the bottom of all hearts.” If the French colonial apparatus is reconstructed, he said, “it will no longer be obeyed; each village would be a nest of resistance, every enemy a former friend.” When Bao Dai proposed a coalition government with the Vietminh, he was roundly rejected. On August 25, 1945, Bao Dai abdicated the Vietnamese throne. Ho entered Hanoi the same day, wearing a brown canvas shirt, short pants, and a brown pith helmet. A week later, on September 2, he announced the creation of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam with a simple message:

We hold these truths that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. . . .

The French have fled, the Japanese have capitulated, Emperor Bao Dai has abdicated; our people have broken down the fetters which for over a century have tied us down; our people have at the same time overthrown the monarchic constitution that reigned supreme for so many centuries and instead have established the present Republican government.

At independence celebrations later that day, United States military officials were invited guests. A Vietminh band played “The Star-Spangled Banner.” Washington was a friend. Vietnam was free. Or so Ho Chi Minh—perhaps tentatively—thought.