

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

The Vietnamese revolution has been associated with the name Ho Chi Minh. “Not only was Ho Chi Minh the founder of his party and later the president of the country, but he was its chief strategist and its most inspiring symbol” (Duiker. 2000: 576). He was an “event-making man” who combined in his own person “two of the central forces in the history of modern Vietnam: the desire for national independence and the quest for social and economic justice” (2000: 577). In Ho, one can find characteristics not only of a great patriot, a man of culture but also of an international communist. As Duiker remarks (2000: 576), “A talented organizer as well as an astute strategist and a charismatic leader, Ho Chi Minh’s image was part Lenin and part Gandhi, with perhaps a dash of Confucius”. This helps to explain the phenomenal support of the Vietnamese people for Ho Chi Minh and his government.

Thailand-Vietnam relations have experienced up and down throughout the history. Interestingly, the “Ho Chi Minh factor” seems to leave its stamp in every phase of the developments of bilateral interactions between the two countries. During the 1945-1969, Ho’s thoughts on the Vietnamese revolution had significant influence on Hanoi’s Thailand policy, including the Viet Kieu policy. On the part of Thailand, the Thai ruling elite’s perception of Ho Chi Minh, which is in line with the beliefs held by each ruling group in each historical period, has had considerable impacts on Bangkok’s Hanoi policy and on Thailand-Vietnam relations.

1. The immediate post-WWII context saw the friendly and fruitful relationship, albeit unofficial, between Thailand under the progressive Seri Thai and Ho Chi Minh’s DRV. In the wake of the resistance against the French colonialists, given the critically political and economic conditions of the newly born DRV, Ho’s Viet Minh looked at Thailand, standing out as the sole Southeast Asian state that escaped from colonialism, bearing anti-French sentiments regarding territorial conflicts with French Indochina, and sheltering a considerable number of Vietnamese, as the southern gateway for the then isolated country to access to the world community and war materials as well as to mobilize the Viet Kieu for the anti-French resistance.

Being president of the DRV and chairman of the party, Ho Chi Minh played a key role in the DRV’s foreign relations. Accordingly, he was not only instrumental in formulating the DRV’s Thailand policy, including policy on the Viet Kieu, but also in

facilitating links with the Thai ruling elite, i.e. Pridi-Isan leaders alliance. Moreover, Ho's image was seen as the inspiration for the Viet Kieu in Thailand to contribute to the Viet Minh's resistance war for independence.

The 1945-1948 periods witnessed the rise of the progressive Seri Thai led by Pridi and Isan leaders in both the Assembly and the Government. Being less monarchy- and less western-oriented, the progressives upheld parliamentary democracy and promoted socialist leaning policies. They also supported anti-colonialist movements in Southeast Asia, especially in Indochina. As a result, the Thai governing elite under Pridi's leadership tended to see Ho as a patriot leader of the Vietnamese. Moreover, in light of Ho's pragmatic approaches in external as well as domestic policies and of Franco-Thai territorial conflicts, other segments of the Thai elite, even the royalists, portrayed the Viet Minh as a nationalist movement and Ho Chi Minh as a representative of the Vietnamese in their struggle for independence.

From the perception, the Thais offered the Viet Minh with invaluable assistance. Though Bangkok did not officially recognize the DRV due to external pressures, the Thais agreed to let the DRV open its legation as well as its news agency in Bangkok, which was seen as of critical importance to the Vietnamese at that time to open links to international and regional communities. In addition, the Seri Thai, especially the Isan leaders, were instrumental in helping the Viet Minh access to war materials and supplies for the latter's anti-French resistance. Also they facilitated the Viet Kieu's revolutionary activities in Thailand to back up anti-French movements in Indochina.

2. The reign of the Pridi-Isan leaders alliance, which was of the progressive school of thought, posed an acute threat to the status and privileges of the royalists, the aristocracy and the military, which represented traditional and neo-traditional schools. Consequently, the conservative royalists and the aristocracy, who had allied with the progressives during WWII to bring down Phibun's military regime, turned their support to the generals, opening another long rule of the military from 1947 up to 1980s. In the context of the Cold War, arguably came to the region in the wake of the recognition of the DRV granted by the Soviet Union and the PRC in 1950, the royalists, the aristocracy and the military saw the need to ally together with the latter assumed the leadership role to protect the Thai capitalist class from threats or challenges posed by the communists and the progressives, i.e. Pridi's legacy. At the same time, they took advantage of the anti-Communist context to lobby for economic and technical assistance from the "Free World" for Thai capitalist development.

From the Cold War capitalist worldview, which at that time reflected a zero-sum confrontation between the two camps, given the historical confrontation between the Siamese and the Vietnamese kingdoms, the Thai ruling elite believed in the Domino Theory and obsessed about communist expansion from Vietnam, which would, in their view, encroach upon “buffer states” of Laos and Cambodia and finally the Northeast of Thailand. In relation to North Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh, given his popularity and charisma, was seen as being responsible for every party policy. As a result, the patriotic and cultural aspect of Ho Chi Minh was downplayed in the face of a communist threat associated with the Comintern veteran Nguyen Ai Quoc. The Thai ruling elite now tended to portray Ho Chi Minh as a totalitarian leader whose policy posed an acute threat to the regional peace, security and order in general and to the Thai national security in particular, especially when the Vietnamese refugees in Thailand openly expressed their respect for the Vietnamese president. Unsurprisingly, the Thai military regime strongly supported the US’s Indochina policy and together with the South Vietnam regime became the closest Southeast Asian allies of the US in the Vietnam War.

The Thai ruling elite’s perception of Ho Chi Minh had significant impacts on the government’s Viet Kieu policy. The refugees were now seen as the “fifth column” who could pose a critical threat to the Thai security given their loyalty to Ho Chi Minh and to Hanoi. As a result, the Thai authorities employed harsh treatments against the Vietnamese. At the same time, they attempted to lessen the influence of Ho Chi Minh in the Vietnamese community as well as to cut off links between the Viet Kieu and the DRV. As a result, Ho’s pictures were banned and community activities associated with Ho Chi Minh and the DRV were outlawed.

The Thai elite’s perception of Ho Chi Minh and Viet Kieu policy had experienced almost no change under the military rule throughout the Cold War. During the 1980s, even the Thai media avoided publishing Ho’s photos. Until the mid-1990s, the Viet Kieu were still afraid of mentioning about their late president in public and were cautious when talking about Ho Chi Minh even with Thai scholars.

3. The demise of the Cold War brought about a new image of international system. Both the Thais and the Vietnamese seemed to be affected by the Dependency Theory, which contends that the ideological confrontation has been replaced by the competition between developed and developing countries, i.e. North-to-South conflict.

Also peace, economic development and cooperation, especially on the regional level, appeared to be high on Hanoi's and Bangkok's agendas.

From the background, in the context of Thailand-Vietnam rapprochement, the cultural aspect of Ho Chi Minh has been back on track. The Thai ruling elite have by and large no longer perceived Ho Chi Minh as a communist threat to the Thai national security but instead as a catalyst for boosting Thailand-Vietnam friendship as well as Isan tourism. The Thais have now referred to Ho Chi Minh as a great patriotic leader of the Vietnamese people and a man of culture. The trend is undoubtedly reflected through the historical sites of Ho Chi Minh in Nakhon Phanom and Udon Thani.

From the elite approach, the post-Cold War Thai politics have witnessed the rise of the provincial politicians, especially those from Isan, and the return of ex-CPT sympathizers in the parliamentary democracy. Unsurprisingly, the ex-activists tended to ally with Isan politicians as opposed to the Democrats whose policies were accused of benefiting only the rich. It was the ex-leftwingers who were behind the populist policy of the NAP and especially TRT. Interestingly, it appeared that under the reign of political parties backed by northeastern politicians such as Chart Thai, NAP, and TRT, Thailand-Vietnam relations were further facilitated. Also the projects of the historical sites of Ho Chi Minh in Nakhon Phanom and Udon Thani, and the policy to grant citizenship to the Viet Kieu seemed to be given stronger boost under NAP and TRT.

In Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh's legacy has been ideologically and culturally strong. In the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the party saw the need to promote Ho's thoughts in order to redefine the way to realize socialism. Accordingly, Ho Chi Minh Thought was formally enshrined in the 7th Party Congress; and since 2003 has officially become a main subject to be taught in universities and colleges. In the cultural sphere, recently a national campaign has been launched to "study and follow the moral example of Uncle Ho".

From the background, the historical sites of Ho Chi Minh in Nakhon Phanom and Udon Thani are undoubtedly appreciated by the Vietnamese given the significance of these sites to Hanoi. Firstly, the presence of the Ho Chi Minh sites in Thailand, Hanoi's main Cold War rival in the region, has been seen as a symbol of Thai-Vietnamese friendship. This helps to propagandize Hanoi's commitment for peace, stability and development in the region. Moreover, the Ho Chi Minh sites are expected to function as a propaganda means to bring Ho Chi Minh, Vietnamese country, culture and people not only to the Thais, especially those still being haunted by the ideological

Cold War confrontation, but also to international visitors. Last but not least, the vestiges are believed to serve Hanoi's policies on overseas Vietnamese as well as on reverence for Ho Chi Minh.

4. Undoubtedly, the Ho Chi Minh sites in Nakhon Phanom and Udon Thani had and will have an important role in Thailand-Vietnam interactions. However, while both the Thai and Vietnamese leaders have hailed the sites as symbols of friendly bilateral relations which could help to enhance understanding and linkage between the two peoples, potential troubles in bilateral relations concerning the Ho Chi Minh image till lie in wait.

4.1. Though Hanoi and Bangkok seem to currently share the image of an international system with the trend of peace, stability and cooperation for economic development and with the main contradiction taking place between developed and developing countries, basically the Thai worldview and the Vietnamese worldview are stemmed from different ideological systems. While the Thais uphold capitalism in the form of a constitutional monarchy, the Vietnamese believe in the "irreversible trend of socialism". This helps to explain the opposition stance to the Ho Chi Minh sites at the first stage of construction. Unsurprisingly, Hanoi made cautious response when the project of the Ho Chi Minh site in Nakhon Phanom was initiated in light of possible political impacts the project might have on the bilateral relations.

Moreover, it is worth noting that the concept of Thai-ness is still predominant in Thai society. As Saichol Sattayanurak (*Bangkok Post*, 9 February 2008) points out, Thai-ness "placed pressure on other races to 'become Thai'...Those of other races which did not or could not truly become Thai did not receive certain rights from the state, did not find convenience in their contacts with bureaucrats, and were even oppressed in various way, ranging from taunts to extortion and use of force". Recently, what has happened in the southernmost provinces where the majority of the population is of Malays is obvious evidence for the dominance of the concept. The presence of the Ho Chi Minh sites in the Thai soil and the respect that the ethnic Vietnamese Thais hold for him, therefore, may be misinterpreted as "non Thai".

4.2. With the sites now opening to public, political and cultural conflicts between the Viet-Thais and "other" Thais would be possible given that the ethnic Vietnamese Thais sometimes over-express their enthusiasm for the sites and their love for the late Vietnamese president. After the inauguration of the Ho Chi Minh sites in Nakhon Phanom and Udon Thani, the ethnic Vietnamese Thai in other provinces such

as Sakhon Nakhon and Nong Khai also wanted to push for the same appeal. This, as Artha (2006) argues, “apparently provoked protest from the locals” in the name of “nationalism”. Some old Viet Kieu who were party cadres during the Vietnam War also express concerns that over-expression from the ethnic Vietnamese Thais for their Uncle Ho may expose themselves to criticism from local Thais.

4.3. It is important to note that the vast majority of the Viet Kieu has received Thai citizenship. Not only did this open the way for them to further integrate into Thai society but it also brought them political as well as economic rights as equal as those of “other” Thai citizens. Given the economic condition of the Viet-Thais, which is by and large dominant in many northeastern provinces (Thin and Thanyathip. 2006), and not least the relative unity of the Viet-Thai community, the ethnic Vietnamese Thais have become important electorates that local politicians have to take into account. Unfortunately, their strong economic status and increasing role in elections have exposed the Viet-Thais to more serious competition¹. From the background, any ethnic Vietnamese Thais’ over-expression of love and respect to the late Vietnamese president may be used as an excuse for economic as well as political marginalization.

With the presence of the Ho Chi Minh sites in the Thai soil, the Ho Chi Minh factor will undoubtedly continue to play an importance role in Thailand-Vietnam interactions. However, if Ho’s image is not appropriately “employed”, it can have negative impacts on Thailand-Vietnam relations. The concerned establishments of the two sides will need to work more closely within and among themselves to ensure the significance and the objectives of these sites to be realized. At the time that the data was being collected, the Vietnamese embassy adopted different approach to the historical site in Udon Thani as opposed to the official opinion held by the Ho Chi Minh Museum². Moreover, at the time the study was being wrapped up, some Thai tourism websites that introduce about the Ho Chi Minh site in Nakhon Phanom were still

¹ From interviews conducted in Nakhon Phanom and Udon Thani in November 2007.

Accordingly, the Viet-Thai community has been known as a relatively unity group and their support helped to ensure the victory of local politicians who established good relations with them. Different from many other Thais, Viet-Thais are not subject to vote-buying and only cast their vote for those politicians whom they think are the best choice. In the 2005 elections, local politicians who competed in the elections tried to win support from Viet-Thais by offering their community representatives with free vocations. This provoked negative response from supporters of these politicians’ opponents, especially Sino-Thais, in which the Viet-Thais became a target.

² The embassy wanted to build a house of Ho Chi Minh with actual size as that in his hometown along side with the house that Ho stayed in Ban Nong On. However, the Ho Chi Minh Museum insisted that for Ho Chi Minh museums abroad, they simply demonstrated how Ho lived and worked in those countries. For those who wanted to see Ho Chi Minh’s house in his hometown should go to Vietnam.

presenting old and inaccurate study results about the time span Ho stayed in Siam (see www.siamleisure.com, www.at-bangkok.com, www.thai-asia.com, www.chiangmai-mail.com)³. Undoubtedly, to put the historical sites into play in terms of boosting the friendship and understanding between the two countries and two peoples, not only are the political, cultural and economic significance of the sites taken into account but also historical accuracy.

In conclusion, the study attempts to investigate the role of the “Ho Chi Minh factor” in Thailand-Vietnam relations since the end of WWII to the present context. Though the main objectives of the study, the researcher believes, are basically realized, only can the work provide preliminary findings for further studies on related subjects. An interesting issue arising from the study is whether there are any factors that could have significant impacts on the Thai “ideology”. After Pridi, the Thais seem to have been super power-oriented. Moreover, the 19 September 2006 coup once again suggests military politics be an important factor in Thai politics. This could be a subject for another study.

³ These tourist websites introduce the vestige in Nakhon Phanom, saying that Ho Chi Minh spent 7 years in Siam. It is the old study's result.