

CHAPTER III

NGUYEN AI QUOC IN SIAM AND HIS IMAGE AMONG THE VIET KIEU

The first stamp of the “Ho Chi Minh Factor” in Thailand-Vietnam relations was of Nguyen Ai Quoc’s stay in Siam¹ from 1928 to 1929 and his stopover in the country in 1930. Being the sole country in Southeast Asia that escaped from colonialism, Siam, given its geographical advantage and the presence of a considerable number of Vietnamese, especially Vietnamese nationalists, was chosen by Nguyen Ai Quoc as a place to set up his revolutionary network in the region in order to liberate his country.

It is worth noting that Nguyen Ai Quoc’s stay in Siam would have either direct or indirect impacts on policy formulation of one country towards the other later on. Also during his time in Siam, Quoc laid the foundation for Thai-Vietnamese friendship at the people-to-people level. To thoroughly understand the interaction between the Viet Minh and the Seri Thai as well as the confrontation between the Thai government and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) during the Cold War, it is, therefore, necessary to explore Quoc’s activities in Siam, his role in promoting the friendship between the Thais and the Vietnamese, and last but not least the Viet Kieu’s reverence for him.

This chapter will begin with a brief presentation of the background of the Viet Kieu in Thailand, followed by the Vietnamese patriotic movement prior to Quoc’s arrival in Siam. This, among other important factors, would create the background for Quoc’s decision to go to Siam to set up a revolutionary network in line with his ideas on “revolutionary path”. Next, Ho’s activities in Siam will be described and his role in promoting the friendship between the Thais and the Viet Kieu will be assessed. Finally, the last part of the chapter will discuss Ho’s image among the Viet Kieu, which would become an important factor that undoubtedly concerned the Thai governing elite with the onset of the Cold War.

3.1. Background of the Viet Kieu in Thailand

The migration of the Vietnamese to Siam was a prolonged process throughout different historical periods since the middle of the 18th century, i.e. from the Ayuddhaya

¹ The name “Thailand” had not existed until June 1939 when the Phibun administration issued an edict dated on 24 June 1939 to change the country’s name from Siam to Thailand

period to the middle of the 20th century. There were various reasons for this migration such as poverty and natural disasters, religious suppression, war hostages, search for refuge asylum, and especially patriotic motives in the colonial era.

Historical records of both Vietnam and Thailand have not given precise data on the initial date of the settlement of Vietnamese in the Kingdom of Siam. According to Thin (2003: 137-138), the earliest wave of Vietnamese immigrants was recorded in Siamese historical documents during the reign of King Narai (r.1656-1688). At this time, in Vietnam political turmoil came with power competition between the Trinh and Nguyen Lords, the former ruling the North and the latter the South. By the end of the 16th century, the Nguyen Lords expanded their territories southwards and adopted a hostile attitude towards Christians. This probably encouraged migration from Vietnam to Siam to escape religious suppression.

The reigns of Rama I, III and IV witnessed relatively big migration moves of the Vietnamese to Siam as a consequence of the conflict between Nguyen Anh and the Tay Son, of competition between the Siamese court and the Vietnamese court over the “buffer” kingdom of Cambodia, and of hardship due to poverty and religious suppression².

The mid-19th century marked a watershed in the Vietnamese history with the coming of the French. By 1884, the French had exerted their dominion over all Vietnam and started “colonial exploitation” plans. This led to another large migrant wave of Vietnamese to the Northeast of Siam to flee French occupation, to escape famine, and to seek job opportunities.

In the early 20th century, a new wave of Vietnamese fled to Siam in the context of French colonialism and anti-colonialism. Many Vietnamese nationalists escaped to Siam after their anti-French movements had been brutally suppressed by the colonial regime. Notably, following the formation of the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) and the failure of the Nghe Tinh Soviets in 1930-1931³, many Vietnamese revolutionists took refuge in northeastern Thailand. Moreover, with the return of the French to

² For more details, see Thin and Thanyathip (2006)

³ The period of 1930-1931 saw a high tide of anti-French activities with the participation of the populace, notably workers, peasants and students. Especially in Nghe Tinh province, interim revolutionary committees in the form of Soviet people’s committees were set up [Xo Viet Nghe Tinh movement]. The movements were then brutally suppressed by the French. Many ICP members were arrested; other members had to flee to China or Siam. ICP networks had been significantly broken till the end of the 1930s (The History of the Communist Party.2006: 67-76)

Indochina after WWII, which saw brutal attacks by French troops in Laos, a considerable number of Vietnamese, estimated around 50000 (Goscha.1999: 155, Chan. 1960: 17)⁴, who were residing along the Mekong River in Laos had to cross the river to seek refuge in Thailand⁵. They generally settled in Thai towns that were more or less directly across the Mekong River from where they had been living in Laos. Accordingly, those who came from Vientiane settled in the districts of Nongkhai and Thabo; those from Thakhek in the vicinity of Nakhon Phanom; and those from Savannakhet in That Phonom and Mukdahan. The Ministry of the Interior designated these people as “Youn Opphayop” (Vietnamese Refugees) or “Youn Mai” (New Vietnamese) to distinguish them from those who had previously arrived in Thailand.

It is important to note that the Vietnamese patriotic movements in Thailand were by and large concentrated among the Vietnamese who came to the country since the early 20th century given that the older generations had generally assimilated into Thai culture and many “were opposed to making sacrifices for principles in which they have no interest” (Goscha.1999: 47). Unsurprisingly, the most active revolutionary activities would be associated with the refugees who fled to Thailand after WWII and who were called by the old Vietnamese, who had settled in Thailand long before, as “New Vietnamese”. Accordingly, the “New Vietnamese” will be the focus of the study though the role of the old Vietnamese in the Vietnamese national liberation revolution cannot be overlooked.

3.2. Patriotic movements of the Vietnamese prior to Quoc’s arrival in Siam

Prior to Ho Chi Minh’s arrival to Siam, Vietnamese nationalists had set up anti-French bases in Siam with the tacit support from the Siamese. Early contacts with the Siamese to call for assistance were established by prominent patriots Phan Dinh Phung and Phan Boi Chau. Their efforts to build up patriotic movements in Siam were then followed by the nationalist Dang Thuc Hua, who successfully established revolutionary bases, albeit on a small scale, in the country for Ho to take over later on.

⁴ However, according to Luu (2004), the number was about 60.000.

⁵ From the early 20th century, the French began shipping Tonkinese labourers to southern Indochina to clear jungle and to work on rubber plantations in Cochinchina and Cambodia in order to deal with serious overpopulation problems in Tonkin and northern Annam as well as shortage of labor in Laos and CPC. The inner workings of the French Indochinese bureaucratic system concentrated Vietnamese immigration in urban centres along the Mekong River in Thakhek, Savannakhet and Vientiane where the Lao population was lowest but where the French needed the most administrative and construction help (Goscha. 1999: 27).

As soon as the French fully controlled Vietnam in 1885, anti-French movements broke out throughout the country. In response to French occupation, the young King Ham Nghi, under the guidance of Regent Ton That Thuyet, called for a resistance movement named *Can Vuong* (Save the King). Under this banner, many Vietnamese anti-colonialists took to mountainous regions in northern and western Vietnam to set up bases in remote jungle areas, particularly in western Nghe An, Ha Tinh and Quang Binh provinces as well as in eastern Laos. At this time, some prominent leading figures such as Phan Dinh Phung⁶ sought assistance from Siam for their resistance cause. However, the *Can Vuong* was eventually suppressed by the much more powerful French forces. As a result, many anti-colonialists fled to the Northeast of Siam; most chose to reside in regions along the Mekong River in the Siamese provinces lying parallel to upper central Vietnam, such as Nong Khai, Nakhon Phanom, Udon Thani, Sakhon Nakhon and Ubon Rachathani (Goscha. 1999: 22).

The *Can Vuong* was succeeded by several anti-French movements in the early 20th century. Prominent among the nationalists was Phan Boi Chau⁷. Chau, impressed by the achievement of the Japanese in modernizing the country and in building up strong military forces which could somewhat match those of European countries, initially planned to oust the French with assistance from Japan. After Chau and his students of the Dong Du movement (Journey to the East) had been expelled from Japan as the result of the Franco-Japanese agreement in 1909, the nationalist, attracted to the success of King Chulalongkorn (Rama V) in modernizing the Siamese kingdom and avoiding colonization, traveled to Siam to organize anti-French movements and

⁶ Phung led the resistance movement (1885-1895) in his base in Huong Khe, Nghe Tinh province. Because of China's problems with the west, Phung explained to his followers the Vietnamese could no longer rely on the Qing Court for support. Phung needed access to Siam to feed an extremely primitive resistance economy in the hills of western Nghe Tinh and eastern Laos and for arm purchase. He relied on a longstanding Vietnamese merchant from Nakhon Phanom to run the movement's external commerce and to levy taxes on local rice producing villages. To import weapons, Phung instructed his partisans to establish a secret route across Laos to connect *Can Vuong* bases in the Nghe Tinh highlands to upper northeastern Siam (Goscha. 1999: 24-25). According to Goscha, Phung received certain assistance from the Siamese court. In the late 1880s, Siamese military forces went so far as to lend a hand to *Can Vuong* forces working out of the mountainous regions near Huong Son, Vu Quang and Dien Bien Phu. Also the Siamese Army provided some arms to the *Can Vuong* movement at this time and met with Phung's partisans.

⁷ Phan Boi Chau (1867-1940) was born in a patriotic family in Nghe An province. He formed the Reformation Association (Duy Tan) in 1903 and began the Dong Du movement (Journey to the east) in 1905 in order to send young Vietnamese to Japan. It is worth noting that an important figure who collaborated with Chau at that time was Prince Cuong De, cousin of King Thanh Thai. The later period saw a conflict between Cuong De's followers who supported the monarchy and Chau's and then Ho's comrades who favored new republican line.

continue training his young fellows. With assistance from Siamese officials⁸, Chau and his partisans could open three training camps in Srisaket and Phichit. In the wake of the Chinese bourgeois revolution led by Sun Yat-sen, Chau headed to China and established the Society of Vietnam Restoration in 1912 with the aim of mobilizing Vietnamese people to liberate Vietnam by force. However, the movement was effectively suppressed by the French in the late 1910s⁹.

In the next decade, nationalist movements among the Vietnamese in Siam were significantly recovered by and associated with another prominent anti-colonialist named Dang Thuc Hua¹⁰ (alias *Tu Di* for his tireless efforts trekking to areas that housed Vietnamese communities to propagandize patriotism). Being one of Chau's active adherents, Hua officially took charge of the training camps in Siam after Chau moved to China to organize patriotic movements there. From 1912 Hua and his partisans began tirelessly traveling around Siam in an effort to build up anti-colonial work among the Vietnamese communities. In the wake of the failure of Chau's movements and pressures from the French on the Siamese court to expel Vietnamese nationalists, Hua moved to China sometime in 1916 and came back to Siam three years later with a new perspective on revolution which probably matched with Ho's standpoint of national liberation. From the time on, Hua refocused his attention on areas in Siam where Vietnamese communities were concentrated and instructed his partisans to "propagate greater patriotism; to help families maintain Vietnamese customs and traditions; and to strive to create better living conditions for them as a means of winning their support" (Goscha. 1999: 46).

Before traveling to China, following the order of the Siamese authorities to dissolve the base due to the pressure from the French, Hua had to move his first base in

⁸ According to Thin and Thanyatip (2006: 90-92), Chau was supported by several high ranking officials in Siam, especially royal members such as Defence Minister Prince Komphraya Phanuvong Voradet. Also see Goscha (1999)

⁹ In order to suppress the resistance, violent policies were applied by the French. Death sentences were pronounced in some cases. Identity cards were issued to monitor closely all Vietnamese entering and exiting Indochina, while the French negotiated legally binding extradition treaties with the Siamese and Chinese governments. By late 1919, Chau's network in Siam had disintegrated (Goscha. 1999: 33, 46).

¹⁰ Dang Thuc Hua was born in 1870 in Luong Dien village, Thanh Chuong district, Nghe An province. His family was well-known and respected for its patriotic and intellectual record. Hua himself passed the Tu Tai examination (equivalent of a bachelor of arts degree) before joining Chau's movement. From Hong Kong, Hua accompanied Chau to Siam in 1909 in a move to find the way to transfer purchased weapons to Vietnam. After Chau moved to China in 1911, Hua officially took charge of the training camps in Siam (Thin and Thanyatip. 2006: 94-96).

Paknampho, Nakhon Savan to Ban Dong, Phichit. After returning to Siam in 1919, Hua decided to build Ban Dong as a center of Vietnamese revolutionary movements. In order to make links with anti-French movements in Vietnam, Hua and his partisans chose Nakhon Phanom as the front station given its strategic location vis-à-vis Vietnam. Here they convinced the Viet Kieu to build up three bases in Watpa village, Ban Ton Phung and Ban May (later renamed Ban Nachok). After this, they opened other bases in Udon Thani which functioned as transit stations from Nakhon Phanom to Ban Dong. Accordingly, new comers from Vietnam would have to go through the “testing” in Nakhon Phanom to prove their patriotism, qualities and national liberation determination before being transferred to Udon Thani for further “testing” and training. They were then selected to move to Ban Dong for patriotically and militarily intensive training before heading to operate in China, which was at that time chosen by Vietnamese nationalists as the headquarters for anti-French movements.

In brief, prior to Quoc’s arrival in Siam, Hua and his partisans had built a patriotic network among the Vietnamese communities. The network would lay the foundation for Quoc’s revolutionary movement as well as for Vietnamese national salvation movements in Thailand later on.

3.3. Nguyen Ai Quoc and his journey to Siam

Siam used to be the place that many Asian nationalists chose to campaign for their revolutionary goals; prominent among them was the Chinese nationalist Sun Yat-sen. Different from many other contemporary revolutionaries, Ho Chi Minh, at the time known by the name Nguyen Ai Quoc, went to Siam in his capacity as a representative of the Comintern with the aim of organizing a revolutionary network in Siam to back up revolutionary movements in Indochina, especially in Vietnam.

Quoc’s journey to the Siamese Kingdom came as a result of political maturity gained by him on the way to “find a path to liberate his country” from French occupation as well as of political developments in Asia, especially nationalist movements in colonies and political upheavals in China.

After fourteen months of studying and working in Moscow, Nguyen Ai Quoc moved to Canton (Guang Zhou), which was at that time known as “Moscow East” (Duiker.2000: 122), in November 1924 to organize training courses for some young Vietnamese patriots. Here he founded the “Association of Youth Vietnamese Patriots” (the Revolutionary Youth League) and was making plans to set up a base of the

Revolutionary Youth League in Siam. In 1925, he sent Ho Tung Mau, one of his associates, to Ban Dong, Phichit to set up branches at Phichit and in Vietnamese communities concentrated at Nakhon Phanom, Udon Thani, and Sakhon Nakhon¹¹. It is worth noting that the name Nguyen Ai Quoc had been relatively widespread among Vietnamese patriots in Siam several years before the man's arrival in the country. According to Luu (2004: 47), after the Versailles incident, the name Nguyen Ai Quoc became so attractive to Vietnamese nationalists that during 1923-1924, the number of young intellectuals traveling to Siam to find Nguyen Ai Quoc had been on the rise.

In 1927, the situation in China was changing rapidly as a result of deteriorating relationship between the Nationalist Party (Kuomintang) and the Chinese Communist Party. According to Duiker (2000: 144-145), the alliance between the two parties had been held together primarily by the force of Sun's own personality and his working relationship with Comintern adviser Mikhail Borodin. After Sun's death in May 1925, Chiang Kai-shek, Sun's military adviser, succeeded him. Increasingly divergent strategic interests of the two parties tore the alliance apart. In April 1927, Chiang ordered the massacre of thousands of Communists and sympathizers, mainly workers, in Shanghai. Consequently, in Canton hundreds of suspected leftists, some of them Vietnamese students associated with the League, were rounded up and shot. Quoc was alerted by one of his close colleagues that he might soon be arrested and was advised to leave as soon as possible.

Accordingly, in early May 1927 Nguyen Ai Quoc secretly left for Hong Kong and soon after this planned to go to Siam to organize a revolutionary movement among the Viet Kieu in order to support the Vietnamese patriotic movement inside Indochina. After leaving China, Quoc stopped over in France, Germany (Berlin), Switzerland, and Italy where he boarded a Japanese ship from Naples to Colombo and then Siam at the end of June 1928.

Why was Siam chosen by Quoc as a foothold for the Vietnamese revolution? Siam had been in Quoc's calculations since 1924 given the former's strategic advantages in terms of location and favorable political environment for Vietnamese revolutionists. In a 1924 letter sent to Peter Rop, Secretary General of the Far Eastern Bureau (or Dalburo for short) at Comintern headquarters, Ho remarked that "native

¹¹ According to Khoan and Tien (2005: 40), the first Youth League's representatives to Siam were Vo Tung and Dang Thai Thuyen. From 1926-1929, the Youth League set up five branches in Siam and two in Laos.

activists are all kept in close watch and acutely hunted in their own countries. However, in a neighboring state, they can carry out their activities more easily since few people know them” (cited in Lien and Hong. 2005: 155).

In the case of Siam, geographically the country was close to central Vietnam, which would be more convenient for revolutionists to go back and forth, especially to escape from the hunt of the French colonialists. Moreover, Siam was the sole country in the region that was not under direct dominion of European powers. Not less importantly, the Siamese were not on good terms with the French due to territorial conflicts with the latter. Additionally, fruitful assistance from the Siamese for anti-French movements led by Quoc’s predecessors as well as patriotic bases built among a considerable number of the Viet Kieu in the country must have convinced Quoc of the advantage of Siam over other regional countries for Vietnamese revolutionists. Ideologically, Ho believed that like Vietnam, the Siamese kingdom was also under unequal treatment by the Western powers. Talking with the Viet Kieu in Siam, Ho remarked, “Vietnam is a colony, Thailand is a semi-colony. Vietnam is under French oppression, Thailand is forced by the French to sign many unequal treaties. The Vietnamese dislike the French and so do the Thais. Moreover, Thailand and Vietnam are neighboring countries. The Thais certainly sympathize with anti-French movements of the Vietnamese” (cited in Trinh. 1961: 36).

Before Nguyen Ai Quoc’s first arrival in Siam, Ho Tung Mau together with Hua’s partisans had set up branches of the Youth League in various places in northeastern Siam. The first branch was established in Phichit in 1926, followed by others in Udon Thani, Sakol Nakhon and Nakhon Phanom. As for the organizational structure, subordinate bodies of the Youth League were created in the form of social associations in provinces where the Viet Kieu were largely concentrated. Notably among them were Viet Kieu cooperatives and friendship associations.

The cooperative was an organization which consisted of young Viet Kieu who bore patriotic sentiments and wanted to liberate the country from French domination. Its main task was to “carry on cultivation and manufacturing for the common good” (Duiker. 2000: 151). The friendship association was an extensive organization of the Viet Kieu which linked migrant families culturally and economically. Under the association were various organizations of women, teenagers and children. Through these organizations, patriotism was gradually promoted and consolidated among the Viet Kieu.

As a result, after leaving China, in June 1927 Ho reported his activities in Canton to the Dalboro, explaining the reason he had to leave China and his plan to work in Siam, "I had to choose one out of the only two options: to stay to get caught or to continue my work in Siam through Moscow" (cited in Lich. 2004: 61). In April 1928, he sent a formal travel request to the Dalboro, stressing that he would prefer to go to Siam to strengthen the movement inside Indochina rather than to return to China. In the letter, he stressed that he "cannot work in France, [is] useless in Germany, but needed in Indochina", appealing "If the working budget is not available, as long as I have money for traveling funded, I will still go because for more than a year I have gone from one country to another while there are so many things to do in Indochina" (Lich. 2004: 63-64). Quoc also asked his Comintern colleagues to lobby for his working trip to Indochina.

According to a recent research done by the Ho Chi Minh Museum on Ho Chi Minh's activities in Thailand, the initial findings suggest that Ho was present in more than twenty places in nine provinces, i.e. Bangkok, Nong Khai, Udon Thani, Sakhon Nakhon, Nakhon Phanom, Ubon Ratchathani, Amnat Charoen, Mukdahan and Phichit (Khoan and Tien. 2005: 155-161). His main objectives in Siam were to reorganize the Vietnamese patriotic movement built up by his predecessors, notably Dang Thuc Hua, to consolidate and expand revolutionary bases in the country politically and economically, and to find the way to link revolutionary bases in Siam with movements in Laos and ultimately with those in Vietnam. Besides, in order to win over support of the Siamese for the Vietnamese revolution following his beliefs on friends-foes and solidarity, Quoc was instrumental in promoting the friendship between the Viet Kieu and the local Thai people.

3.4. Ho's activities in Siam and his role in promoting the friendship between the Vietnamese and the Thai

Soon after arriving in Siam in July 1928¹², Nguyen Ai Quoc worked with key members of the Youth League, who were operating among the Viet Kieu in the Northeast, to consolidate the Youth League's bases and to foster the propaganda for patriotism in various places where there were Vietnamese communities. He trained his adherents about revolutionary theory, unsurprisingly based on his Marxist worldview. However, the methods to carry out revolution that Ho educated his partisans mostly

¹² According to Thin and Thanyathip (2006), Nguyen Ai Quoc arrived in Siam in August 1928.

stemmed from Ho's principled and causal beliefs – the need to mobilize the people on the spirit of patriotism, to broaden the organization and build a mass base for the league by appealing to the entire local population and not just radical youths, and not least to promote Viet-Thai friendship.

The factor that Ho put his weight behind during his stay in Siam was patriotism. Upon his arrival to Sakol Nakhon, where there were more Vietnamese but less politically enlightened than in Udon, Ho actively lightened up and promoted patriotic sentiments among the Viet Kieu. From 1926-1928, the Viet Kieu here celebrated the death of Pham Hong Thai, a member of young Vietnamese patriots' organization Tam Tam Xa (Association of Like Minds) in China who died while attempting to assassinate the French Governor General of Indochina Martial Merlin on 19 June. When Ho arrived at the area, he proposed to change the event into the commemoration for the "National Prestige" on the grounds that in the same month 45 years ago, the Nguyen Court signed a treaty to accept French protection. Moreover, noticing that many Vietnamese believed in the spirit of the traditional Vietnamese military hero Tran Hung Dao, Ho wrote verses for a song about Tran Hung Dao to remind the Viet Kieu about their patriotic tradition.

At the temple of Dien Hong and before the genies, the sermon is given
The people, with one heart, are revolved for all,
And whoever should wish to seize Vietnam
Must first kill us to the last man
So long as one Vietnamese remains on this soil
The mountains and the waters of Vietnam will remain his Fatherland
(cited in Duiker. 2000: 153)

Besides, during his "training tours" in Siam, Ho also initiated "changes in the working habits and lives of his compatriots" (Duiker. 2000: 152). He always encouraged them to keep traditional culture, especially righteous behaviors, i.e. to love and help compatriots, to respect parents and the elderly people, to take care of and educate children. "Ho insisted that the émigrés apply for government permission to open up schools where both Vietnamese and Thai would be taught. In every community to which he trekked, he promoted the opening of medical facilities for the émigrés. Hand in hand with these methods went a subtle attack on such practices as gambling, drinking, and indulgence in old superstitions" (Flood. 1977: 33).

At various places where he stopped for propaganda, Quoc reiterated the need for winning over the local people for the patriotic movement of the Viet Kieu. Immediately after he arrived in Udon, Ho convened a meeting among the cadres to inform them of the world situation, political developments in Vietnam as well as characteristics of the

Vietnamese revolution. He emphasized the importance of having the Thais sympathize with the Vietnamese revolution and of educating the Viet Kieu to respect local customs and laws. Joining the children to bring sweet potatoes to Thai families to exchange for rice, Ho taught them to have proper behaviors in line with Siamese customs and practices. Moreover, he also encouraged the Viet Kieu to study Thai along with Vietnamese, for it helped to communicate with Thai people and to understand local regulations and culture.

The place that witnessed Ho's longest stay was in Ban May, Nakhon Phanom. Like in other places, here Ho was known as a gentleman who always educated and encouraged people to live honestly, to sympathize with Vietnamese compatriots and love the country, to respect Siamese laws as well as establish friendship with local Thai people. He encouraged the Viet Kieu to observe Vietnamese moral practices which were reflected in Vietnamese proverbs such as "When eating fruits, remember who plant the tree" (*An qua nho ke trong cay*), "To live righteously so that when you stay, people love you, when you leave, they miss you" (*Di cho nguoi ta nho, o cho nguoi ta thuong*), "A stranger nearby is better than a relative who lives far away" (*Ban anh em xa, mua lang gieng gan*). Hitherto, these proverbs are frequently cited by the ethnic Vietnamese Thai who are of the second generation whenever they mention about Ho¹³.

From Ho's standpoint, active members tirelessly traveled to the areas where Vietnamese communities were concentrated to educate and organize them under the umbrella of the Youth League. Though the measures varied depending on each cadre and community, the common formula was to take advantage of patriotic sentiments among the migrants to link them together culturally and economically; gradually win over each family, first and foremost the family heads, then the whole community; and at the same time educate and promote patriotic sentiments among them. Patriotism was promoted as a thread to link the Viet Kieu together for a common cause – to liberate the country.

Consequently, not only had the sense of patriotism among the Viet Kieu been on the rise, their betterment had been increased. "Bad habits of unhealthy business competitions had faded away, the number of thieves and burglars had been on a decrease, community society had been in order and stable. These behavioral developments were welcomed from and were set as examples by local authorities and

¹³ According to interviews conducted during May 19th-23rd 2007 in Nakhon Phanom.

people” (Khoan and Tien. 205: 43). Moreover, “the local Vietnamese community gradually began to improve relations with the surrounding Thai population by digging wells, felling trees, and building schools” (Duiker. 2000: 152).

Also it is worth noting that during his first stay in Siam, Ho paid considerable attention to establishing a liaison with Vietnam via Laos from Nakhon Phanom. According to Hoan (cited in Goscha. 1999: 79), during a subsequent meeting in Siam, Ho met with Viet Kieu cadres summoned from Laotian towns to discuss what was to be done in Laos and how they could “strengthen liaisons with the Siamese side in order to mobilize the revolution in Vietnam”. In autumn 1928, he crossed the Mekong River to Pakse, then Savanakhet and Xiengvang (South of Thakhek, where a large Vietnamese community resided) to investigate the situation and revolutionary activities among the Viet Kieu in Laos.

As a result, from 1928-1930, six revolutionary bases were set up among the Vietnamese communities in Vientiane, Thakhek, Savanakhet, Phongtiou, and Boneng (Lien and Hong. 2005, Luu. 2004). As in Siam, the Viet Kieu in Laos were closely attached to one another culturally and economically, and were organized under the umbrella of the Youth League and then the communist party for the sake of the national liberation “mission”. This helps to explain the massive move of the Viet Kieu from Laos to Thailand in the context of the French return to Indochina after WWII, and not least the reverence the Viet Kieu held for Ho Chi Minh in later decades.

In the wake of the split among Vietnamese revolutionary movements, which was related to the establishment of a communist party in Vietnam, in November 1929 Ho left Siam for China and then moved to Hong Kong to unite these movements into one single party – the Vietnamese Communist Party, renamed Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) later. After this, Ho came back to Siam sometime in March or April 1930 to inform his comrades about the establishment of the party and instruct the transfer of the Youth League into a communist entity before heading to Shanghai.

3. 5. Viet Kieu’s reverence for Ho

“The Vietnamese loved and respected him because he had struggled tirelessly to save his country. His spirit was that of a man who was not seduced by riches, shaken by poverty or corrupted by power.” (Warbey. 1972: 113)

With the birth of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam on 2 September 1945, the legend of Ho Chi Minh officially began. Ho, in the capacity as the head of the state and foreign minister, became the symbol of the nation and national independence. The

aspiration of the Vietnamese people for much-awaited independence, which was based on the firm foundation of patriotism, the strong desire of the majority to change their impoverished, humiliated and suffering life under colonial rule, the activeness of the Viet Minh, and not least Ho's determination to achieve national independence, his quest for social and economic justice as well as his personal simplicity, all attributed to the esteem Ho Chi Minh received from his cadres and the majority of the Vietnamese people.

The same vein went for the Viet Kieu in Thailand. Particularly, Ho's esteem was built up from the background of patriotism which was paid off from the tireless efforts of the Youth League and then the ICP to build up revolutionary bases in Thailand. Moreover, Ho's legend was supplemented by his mysterious activities in Siam eighteen years ago.

Background for the esteem Ho received from the Viet Kieu in Thailand

Vietnamese history is one of the struggle for building and defending the nation, which was formed at an early stage in history. The expansion from the Van Lang state (Hung kings) to the Au Lac state reflected the victory of unity, solidarity and harmony over localism and separatism of the then communities on the land. The early statehood helped to form a strong foundation for the maintenance and development of the Vietnamese nation-state, through the life-and-death struggle of the nation during the thousand years of northern annexation (Nien. 2004: 32). Throughout history, the Vietnamese resistance against China's domination helped to bind the people together and raised the sense of patriotism to a degree that it has become a striking characteristic of the people. Since the early period of history, "From the day of the Trung Sisters, throughout 1000 years of Chinese rule, the Vietnamese rose time and again against alien domination" (Hammer. 1966: 55). The Vietnamese achieved independence in the 10th century but the struggle against foreign invasion was going on throughout the next centuries. Whenever Northern authorities tried to take over Vietnam again, they met with determined resistance.

The tradition helped to bring about close interactions between the court and the people in two aspects. Firstly, the ruling class soon recognized that it was the people who could wield the power to resist alien domination. Thus the court's appreciation of the role of the people as the foundation of the regime was not uncommon throughout feudal Vietnamese dynasties. Almost every feudal dynasty, as a result, forged

propaganda for the promotion of patriotism, sometimes abused by the court by translating patriotism as being loyal to the king. As for the people, the inferior status as well as sufferings they experienced under any alien domination compelled them to willingly take responsibility for defending the country. Traditionally, for the Vietnamese people, being under alien domination meant to live as slaves, and the sense of belonging to an independent country was nothing but one that they were willing to pay at all costs.

In the Vietnamese history, the most honored national heroes are those who led the country to fight against alien invaders. That is why though Nguyen Phuc Anh could build a relatively powerful kingdom (Gia Long dynasty) in the early 19th century, for Vietnamese people he still has a lower profile compared to his predecessor Nguyen Hue, the leader of the Tay Son who later reigned as Emperor Quang Trung, given that Nguyen Hue during his reign led the country to force back the Qing's powerful army, while Nguyen Anh had to seek alien assistance to take power over from the Tay Son. However, it does not mean that the Vietnamese do not appreciate external assistance; rather they tend to consider it proper if it is sought to liberate the country from alien domination, not for one's advantage in internal conflicts. This helps to explain why in the context of French colonialism and American intervention, the overwhelming majority of the people definitely supported Ho and his national liberation cause compared to either Bao Dai's government set up by the French or later Southern governments under the US patronage.

From this perspective, it came as no surprise that the great majority of the Viet Kieu warmly responded to Ho Chi Minh's call for the independence struggle. Like their compatriots in Vietnam, the majority of the Viet Kieu in Thailand at that time longed for national independence. In the wake of the establishment of the DRV, Ho's image became something sacred and could not be separated from the nation, especially after the Viet Kieu knew that their national leader was actually the respected Thau Chin, the alias used by Ho during his time in Siam. According to Chan (1960: 81), about 95% of the Vietnamese refugees, even many Christians, in Thailand were either pro-Viet Minh or under the Viet Minh's influence. This probably did not come as the result of the complicated theory of Marxism and Leninism, but of the attractiveness of "independence" and "Ho Chi Minh".

Ho Chi Minh's image among the Viet Kieu

"During the years of struggle against the French, Ho won for himself the title of 'Uncle Ho': a sign of both affection and of respect...He gained the hearts and the minds of people of all ages and of all sections of society because he was one of them and shared their needs, and their aspiration." (Warbey. 1972: 104)

Consequently, "independence", "patriotism" and "Ho Chi Minh" or "Uncle Ho" seemed to be perceived as one single entity by the Viet Kieu. Also the Viet Kieu talked about a "cult of Ho Chi Minh" along the lines of Vietnam's traditional ancestor cult (Poole. 1970: 106). Generally, in Viet Kieu families, even in the provinces where revolutionary operations were less active such as in Chiang Mai¹⁴, Ho's pictures were duplicated and solemnly hung; Ho's teachings were commonly cited for righteous and moral behaviors, especially in terms of parents' education of their children. For children, being granted the title of "good children of Uncle Ho" and receiving "Ho's candies" were their pride and motives for competition in study or in collective activities.

As the ICP Central Committee's members in Thailand recalled (Tuan.1977, Trinh. 1961), Ho Chi Minh's pictures, which were suspended in almost every Viet Kieu's house, naturally became something sacred among the Vietnamese. When the Viet Kieu were forced to move to five provinces, namely Nongkhai, Sakhon Nakhon, Nakhon Phanom, Ubon and Prachinburi under the concentration policy of the Thai government, which started in 1950, they appealed to Thai officials to carefully lay Ho's images on the vehicles' roof, separated from other household items. For those who had to walk, "it was not uncommon to see Vietnamese women who were carrying shoulder poles and hangers with Ho's picture on top" (Tuan. 1977: 23). "On the way to new places, though the Viet Kieu had to leave behind many of their belongings, they still brought Ho's pictures with them...On Ho's birthday, the Viet Kieu, either being Christians or Buddhists, went to pagodas to pray for Ho's health and longevity" (Trinh.1961: 74).

When the relationship between Thailand and the DRV became strained as the result of the Thai government's anti-communist policy, in response to the Thai authorities' ban on hanging Ho's images at home, the Viet Kieu managed to turn his picture into the altar for worshipping the nation and ancestors, set up with joss-stick bowls, candles, charms, Buddha images or statues which were believed to be sacred by

¹⁴ According to an interview with an ethnic Thai Vietnamese, who resided in Chiang Mai during the Vietnam War's time, conducted on 17 August 2007 in Bangkok

the Thai¹⁵. By doing so, for one thing the altar met the traditionally spiritual demand of the Viet Kieu to worship their ancestors and express their respect for Ho Chi Minh. Also it helped to circumvent the Thai authorities' prohibition against hanging Ho's pictures by capitalizing on the Thai spiritual belief.

When the police came to search the house and asked for bringing the altar down, the Viet Kieu lighted incenses and prayed and cited spiritual beliefs for not taking the altar down. Usually the Thai police, most of them were under strong influence of Buddhism and animism like other Thais, hesitated to use force to dissolve the altar. However, if the Thai police themselves, especially those who were "brave enough" to overcome the spiritual hesitation, brought down the altar, the whole family together with their neighbors gathered to appeal and/or invited Buddhist monks to go to the family for praying. In some areas, the Viet Kieu even made up stories about the "magic punishment" felt upon on Thai policemen who brought the altar down to create reluctance among the police when they had to deal with the issue¹⁶. Consequently, after a survey trip to the Northeast in the mid 1950s, the US Ambassador to Bangkok, as the Viet Kieu recalled, had to recommend the Thai military regime to abandon the policy and suggested them to repatriate the refugees instead¹⁷.

Likewise, in response to the Thai authorities' prohibition against Viet Kieu's organizing Ho's birthday ceremonies in the community, the Viet Kieu managed to celebrate his birthday either in the community, disguising it with community activities, or in families. In Vietnamese communities, collective activities such as sport games, pupil competitions or art performances (dancing and/or singing) were frequently organized on May 19th (Ho's birthday). In families, on September 2nd (Vietnamese National Day), May 19th, or *Tet* (traditional Vietnamese new year), parents used to buy candies, called "Ho's candies" by them, to put on the altar and then distributed to their children.

¹⁵ Basically, the altar thus set up was arranged as followed: in the middle was the picture of Ho and the national flag; on the top was the slogan "The nation first"; on the left, "Thrifty, Patient, Mutual Assistance"; on the right, "Long lasting Thai-Vietnamese friendship"; at the bottom, "Long lasting President Ho".

¹⁶ The information was based on an internally circulating document written by Ngo Tuan (1977) who was in charge of the ICP activities in Thailand during the Vietnam War. It was also confirmed by interviews conducted in Bangkok in 2006, in Nakhon Phanom and Udon Thani in May and November 2007

¹⁷ According to interviews with ethnic Vietnamese Thais in Udon Thani on 6 November 2007

In the wake of Ho Chi Minh's death, mourning ceremonies were held at three levels, i.e. at Viet Kieu families, in village communities and in big provincial pagodas in the areas where the Viet Kieu were concentrated. For the seven-day mourning ceremony, the Viet Kieu managed to set up altars in the pagodas, inviting hundreds of monks and Thai people to attend. In many families, family members, old and young, male and female, shaved their head to pay tribute to Ho. Collective meetings were organized to read Ho Chi Minh's will. Young people wrote down his will and biography to "remember the father of the nation" (Tuan. 1977: 36). Also extensive campaigns were launched to "implement Uncle Ho's will", i.e. to boost industrious and thrifty practices, to further build up Viet-Thai friendship, to encourage new way of life (lifting out out-dated customs such as the habit of offering at local temples to cure human ailments instead of going to see doctors or using modern medicine, anti-extreme superstition movements), and to contribute to the national liberation cause¹⁸.

3.6. Conclusion

Siam had gone into Ho Chi Minh's attention since his early days in China in the mid 1920s. Geographically, the country was close to Vietnam. Politically, Siam was the sole Southeast Asian country that escaped from colonialism. Notably, the Siamese were in conflict with the French over territorial issues. In this respect, Ho saw the Siamese fate was similar to that of the Vietnamese in their relations with Western powers. Practically, the kingdom had extended assistance to Vietnamese nationalists in their resistance against the French and there had been a patriotic network set up among the Viet Kieu in Siam. Consequently, in the wake of the breakdown of the nationalist-communist alliance in China in 1927, Ho decided to go to Siam to organize revolutionary movements among the Viet Kieu in the country, primarily in order to back up the movement in Vietnam.

During his stay in Siam, Ho Chi Minh's sheer will power and strong sense of patriotism, his talent but simple way of life with a habit of planning for daily activities had convinced the Viet Kieu, especially Vietnamese nationalists in Siam, of the revolutionary path they should follow and the future of an independent nation. Furthermore, he was instrumental in promoting the friendship between the Vietnamese and the Thais. Ideologically, this reflected Ho's beliefs in people's power and solidarity – making more friends. Though some may argue that this first and foremost aimed at

¹⁸ Ibid.

winning support from the local people for the Vietnamese revolution, this undoubtedly contributed to further understanding between the two peoples and not least laid the foundation for the Viet Kieu to integrate themselves into Thai society and become part of Isan culture later on. Building up Thai-Vietnamese friendship would then become the core of the ICP's policy on revolutionary activities in Thailand.

Like their compatriots in Vietnam, the Viet Kieu felt reverence for Ho as the result of their patriotism as well as Ho's charisma and simple way of life and his firm desire for national independence. The practice has a firm root in the Vietnamese tradition – a tradition of defending and building the nation. Unfortunately, while the DRV and the ICP quickly took advantage of the phenomenon to unite and mobilize the Viet Kieu for the national liberation struggle, in the context of the Cold War the popularity of Ho among the Viet Kieu was seen by many Thai elite in power as a threat to Thai national security and the Vietnamese refugees were considered “the fifth column”. Accordingly, after the period of friendly relationship between the Viet Minh and the progressive Seri Thai, albeit unofficial, came the fierce confrontation between the DRV and the Thai military regime. Interestingly, the “Ho Chi Minh factor” would play a significant role in the developments which the study will turn to in the next two chapters.