

# Ho Ch Minh and the Making of Modern Vietnam

Quest Club

February 5, 2016

Steve Williams

On the afternoon of September 2, 1945 Ho Chi Minh addressed the people of the newly minted Democratic Republic of Viet Nam. He opened his remarks – the nation’s declaration of independence – with the following words:

*All men are created equal. They are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights; among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.*

He duly attributed the source of this prose, and asserted that it applied to all peoples on earth. Fulfillment of that creed was, in 1945 Hanoi, as tenuous as when initially uttered in Philadelphia in 1776.

During World War II Japanese forces had ousted the French which, following a conquest that began in 1858, had maintained colonial rule over Vietnam, then a part of French Indochina. Famine struck the country. There had been a substantial shortfall in the 1944 rice harvest: Japan confiscated large quantities of the staple and exported it to the homeland. Hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese perished from hunger. Bolstered by the anger of the people, the Vietminh – the insurgent military force which had absorbed the Indonesian Communist Party– stepped up its attacks on the puppet regime installed by Japan. The United States, through the Office of Strategic Services (today’s CIA) offered significant though clandestine support to the rebels and in August 1945 the regime fell.

Soviet historians have hailed the August revolution as a monumental testimony to the genius of the Communist party and its leader – Ho Chi Minh. Modern scholarship has interpreted it as a largely spontaneous event, energized by the collapse

of the Japanese empire and localized conditions. But, it was a starting point – a beginning which would encounter formidable obstacles – obstacles which were immediate and enduring.

I will first attempt to peel away the mystique enveloping the man – Ho Chi Minh – who was instrumental in navigating those encounters, then present an overview of today's nation.

It is estimated that the character known as Ho Chi Minh had or adopted as many as fifty distinct aliases. He was born in 1890 in Amman, the middle of the three colonial regions established by the French. He was given the name Nguyen Tat Than. His father was regarded a member of the scholarly gentry. But it was not a scholarly life: The wife and daughters worked a small plot as a rice field which, together with a garden, provided sustenance in the centuries-old feudal system which remained intact under French rule. Similar to its European counterpart it was based upon an agrarian economy, in which lands were rented by peasants. Civil authority was exercised by territorial mandarins who owed allegiance to the emperor. And there was a highly developed sense of community based on the ethical teachings of Confucius. The Asiatic model differed in its refined structure of civil service personnel to manage a plethora of ministerial functions. The system embraced Confucian ethics which relied on moral suasion as a means of maintaining competency and integrity of officials. Positions were awarded on the basis of competitive examinations. Those seeking to advance to more prestigious positions were required to master a progressively rigorous system of

examinations. The educational system was designed to prepare candidates for entry into the civil service system. Than's father earned advanced degrees and occupied a mid-level position which accorded him the admiration of his fellow villagers. His attempts to ratchet up to higher levels were unsuccessful.

Than was initially tutored by his father and sequentially progressed to local and urban schools. He was exposed to teachers who chafed at French dominance. Societal decay festered as Confucian institutions were displaced by the French who propped up an increasingly degenerate monarchy and its corrupt underlings. And the humiliation of Imperial Russia in the Russo-Japanese war of 1904-05 gave encouragement to Asians that they could prevail against the more powerful western military forces.

A fifteenth century Confucian scholar taught that it was necessary to first understand an enemy in order to defeat him. Than, who had determined to pursue liberation of Vietnam, began studying the French language. Anti-French passions became more intense and a demonstration broke out in the city of Hue, where Than was a student in a prestigious school. He participated, acted as an interpreter on behalf of the protesters, and was dismissed from the school. He fled to the southern region of Cochin China where, after a brief stay, he obtained employment on an ocean liner. He would not return to his native land for three decades.

The full course of his odyssey is uncertain. A postcard and a letter place him in New York and Boston in 1912. There was a brief stay in Britain. But the next meaningful chapter of his life begins with his emergence in France sometime prior to

1917 where he attended meetings of the French socialist party. In the summer of 1919 he formed an organization which recruited Vietnamese living in France and established a liaison with other nationalist organizations of Koreans and Tunisians who sought to throw off colonial rule. He became active in the French Socialist Party. And he alone claimed credit for drafting the *“DEMANDS OF THE ANNAMITE PEOPLE”* (the ancient name of Vietnamese). He presented the document to the Versailles peace conference which was considering Woodrow Wilson’s Fourteen Points. Included in the demands were political autonomy for the Vietnamese people; freedom of association, religion, press and movement; abolition of forced labor; and abolition of the French taxes on salt, opium and alcohol. It received no attention. The significance of the document is that it was signed with the pseudonym Nguyen Ai Qouc – translated “Nguyen the Patriot”. It was the name which he would adopt and proudly use for many years.

He was among the splinter group that bolted from the factious socialists to form the French Communist Party in 1920, a group that advocated revolution as a holy war against capitalism. Yet, his extensive writings which gained prominence throughout this period tended to ignore ideology, instead focusing on colonial brutality and efforts to overthrow the colonial system. His writing style was simple and direct. And, while he possessed much personal magnetism, in his frequent speaking appearances he approached his audience in a pedestrian style as common workers, not intellectuals. Some further insight into his personality is revealed by his comment that the people in

France were good and quite different from the colonial occupiers of Asia. His complaint was with the colonial system which debased human character. Yet, this enigmatic revolutionary adopted a new pen name, Nguyen o Phap, translated "Nguyen Who Detests the French".

In 1923 he accepted an invitation to travel to Russia. During his French stay our man - now commonly known as "Quoc" -- had formed an acquaintance with Dimitri Manuilsky, a ranking official of the Communist Party in the USSR. Manuilsky was subsequently ordered by the executive committee of the party to prepare a report on national and colonial questions for presentation at a major Soviet conference. He immediately thought of the firebrand Quoc, whom he invited to Moscow to work for the Party.

Adopting a well planned ruse, Quoc eluded the constant surveillance of French detectives and traveled under a visa using the name Chen Yan, who professed to be a Chinese merchant. He spoke in French when he addressed the conference, urging inclusion of eastern peoples in the Communist International. Heeding his plea, the conference established a new Peasant International which was to unite peasants of all countries. While in Russia he attended the Communist University of Toilers of the East - commonly known as the "Stalin School", since it was under the supervision of Josef Stalin who had not yet ascended to control of the party. It was a resident school which offered academic as well as military training. Students were organized into cells, to better monitor orthodox ideology. Himself more of a pragmatist than a theorist, Quoc

remained aloof from the rampant factional disputes within the Bolshevik regime.

He was greatly distressed by Lenin's death in January 1924. An Italian acquaintance wrote that in the bitter cold of the Moscow winter a frail young man had come to his hotel room and announced that he was Nguyen Ai Quoc and was on his way to pay his respects to the state viewing of Lenin's body. He admonished the visitor that he was dressed too lightly for the below zero cold and should wait until they obtained warmer clothing. The visitor left, presumably to go to his room. But late that night there again came a knock, and Quoc stood there trembling, his face, ears, nose and fingers, blue from the cold. He explained that he could not endure waiting to pay homage to the best friend of colonial peoples.

Writing of Lenin's death, he said:

*In his life he was our father, teacher, comrade and adviser. Now he is our guiding star that leads to social revolution. Lenin lives on in our deeds. He is immortal.*

Words that would, at a later day, aptly capture the veneration of Ho and his enduring persona that would inspire the Vietnamese fighters.

Quoc remained a steadfast exponent of Lenin's strategy – that of a two stage revolution which consisted of an overthrow of existing imperialistic regimes and establishing democratic government, which would in time move onto the second stage of socialism. The ruling elements of the soviet system quickly abandoned Lenin's approach – fearing that it allowed an opening for counter revolutionary movements – and insisted upon a single stage overthrow accompanied by immediate, proletariat

imposed socialism. Quoc's unrelenting adherence to Leninist strategy estranged him from Stalin and the dominant element that emerged from the factious Soviet establishment.

Quoc would, however, adopt a distinct tactical approach which countered that of Lenin. The latter emphasized terrorist measures and insisted that a revolutionary must be a blind, ruthless instrument of the cause; willing to defy moral standards, to cheat, lie and be unrestrained in advancing the ends of the revolution.

Quoc deviated sharply, advocating a code of conduct remarkably resembling the imbedded ethic of traditional Confucian morality. The revolutionary was to be bold, courageous and persevering in the interest of the party, and subordinate personal needs to those of the revolution.

Unable to return to France where he faced arrest, Quoc moved on to China. Revolution had toppled the ancient Chinese dynasty which was succeeded by a fragile republic. Warlords continue to exercise effective dominion over vast areas. The coalition of the Chinese Nationalist Party and the fledgling Communist organization formed a united front in an ongoing effort to depose the warlords and unify China.

There were, at the time, those who advocated revolution throughout Indochina. Quoc opposed any attempt at an indigenous uprising. In his words: "To say that [Indochina], with more than twenty million exploited people is now ready for a revolution is wrong; but to say that it does not want a revolution and is satisfied with the regime . . . is even more wrong." He urged moderation and restraint. The people,



particularly those of his native Vietnam, simply were not ready.

There was, in the Vietnamese language, no word for “revolution”. Operating from his Chinese base he began to incubate revolution in neighboring Vietnam. His prolific writings began to define the revolutionary concept – that of destroying the old/bad and building the new/good. The assertion that communism was the solution to the forlorn plight of the people was tactfully woven into articles which he published in a periodical that was distributed throughout Indochina. Both the French and the native, collaborative monarchy were targeted.

He also orchestrated the formation of a Vietnamese youth league which conducted a cross-border “Special Institute for the Vietnamese Revolution” and recruited a steady stream of Vietnamese interns. The program extended over a period of three to four months during which students were indoctrinated in Leninist ideology and tactics, organizing and addressing groups of workers and sowing the seeds of revolution. Students swore a vow to serve the revolutionary cause, after which most returned to Vietnam. Select students who demonstrated greater talent were sent to Moscow for advanced training.

During this period of the 1920's the content of Quoc's message suggest he had moved from nationalism to international communism. But he remained steadfast in his belief that time was needed to lead the masses to an understanding and embrace of communism, rather than an uninspired rebellion. That process would be engaged within an external wrapper of liberation & national independence.

In 1927, after having been in China two years, he married Tang Tuyet Minh. Shortly thereafter he fled China, leaving his wife behind – en route to the British Crown colony of Hong Kong. His departure was prompted by the blood-bath that had spread throughout the land when the Nationalists, under the leadership of Chian Kai-shek, reacted to the Chinese Communist Party's attempt to assert control and ordered the slaughter of thousands of communists.

During the succeeding years he bounced between Hong Cong and Siam, while continuing to use the name Nguyen Ai Quoc. From Siam he orchestrated the formation of the Vietnamese Communist Party, which soon splintered into three divergent groups. Quoc would not venture onto Vietnam soil, having been condemned to death in absentia on grounds of treason – a fugitive sought by both French and imperial authorities. But he summoned leaders of the schismatic organizations to a 1930 unity conference in Hong Kong, with a view to securing formal recognition of the Vietnamese Communist party by the Communist International – or Comintern, as it was known – the central Bolshevik organization headquartered in Moscow. At Moscow's insistence the name was changed to The Indonesia Communist Party. More than a mere symbolic gesture, this underscored the Stalinist insistence that all nationalist sentiment be expunged. Nationalism was viewed as a petty bourgeois concern that diverted energy from the international mission of communism.

Quoc's dedicated focus on Vietnamese independence became the second wedge which – alongside his advocacy of Leninist strategy – distanced him from Stalin. And a

third heresy would emerge: His pragmatic recognition of the strength afforded by a united front, forged from alliance with non communist forces, was an anathema to Soviet ideology.

During this period social unrest developed in Vietnam. French colonial rule exploited the workers. Rubber plantations, rice farming, and coal mining accounted for bulk of output. Workers lived in camps, rising at 4 a.m. and working each of the seven days of the week. It was said that sons did not know their fathers, nor dogs their owners. The Confucian tradition of providing small garden plots to afford sustenance to peasants, had largely disappeared, due to seizure of lands by colonial officials — who often ceded land to the Catholic church. Industrialization had been introduced, financed primarily by French capital, in the wake of World War I. Sweatshop conditions prevailed. It was, in the words of one author, “a situation that Charles Dickens would have recognized and deplored.”

Demonstrations occurred. The demonstrators appear to have been motivated by a variety of grievances. Some were intellectuals intent on liberation from foreign rule. Peasants were driven by desperation, as well as their hatred of the mandarin's — the feudal rulers who were sustained by colonial rule. The remonstrance escalated to riots, first at a rubber plantation; then a series of labor strikes in diverse areas. In the central region several thousand farmers marched to a local plantation and destroyed property. The French Foreign Legion retaliated in force, killing several peasants. Elsewhere, a throng of demonstrators marching to a provincial capital were bombed by the French

air force, leaving hundreds dead and wounded.

Conditions appeared ripe under the criteria which Quoc had stated for initiating revolution – when “the yoke of the ruling classes has become intolerable, and the village masses are in a state of revolutionary ferment and ready to fight actively against the established order.” But, lacking strength and direction, the party issued a statement which cautioned against immediate revolution. Instead, it embarked on a heightened propaganda campaign, eliciting further animosity toward the regime which had imposed the brutal reaction against the people. While there is little to suggest that the upheaval was initiated by organized communist action, the party fanned agitation and contributed to clandestine assassinations of French collaborators.

Following an absence of thirty years, Quoc returned to Vietnam in the spring of 1941 where, for a period of seven weeks, he hid in a cave located 3 kilometers from the Chinese border. Eventually settling in Hanoi he there established the secreted headquarters of the Indochina Communist Party. It appears that his disaffected countrymen simply acknowledged his de facto leadership – influenced in part by the vacuum of potential rivals who had been eliminated by colonial and imperial forces. His resolute pragmatism demanded much energy in restraining the ideological and militant elements within the party. Patience, calmness and vigilance are, he warned, “the things that a revolutionary must never forget.”

In the fall of 1942 he traveled to China. Some say for the purpose seeking assistance from Chiang Kai-Shek's Nationalist forces in battling Japanese occupiers: Others contend he sought to strengthen ties with the Chinese Communist Party. Whatever the motive, he carried an identity card with the name of Ho Chi Minh, purporting to be a Chinese reporter. Three days following his arrival he was arrested on suspicion of being a Japanese agent. Initially imprisoned under extreme conditions, his health failed and he contracted tuberculosis. Over a course of eighteen months he was moved from prison to prison. When his true identity as Nguyen Ai Quoc was ascertained, influential Chinese intervened with Chiang Kai Shek who reluctantly acknowledged that although a communist, any who lent support to defeating Japan ought not be treated as a criminal. Ho was released, but remained under continuing surveillance. He would not return to Vietnam until September 1944.

Following the Japanese surrender a conference was convened by the Vietminh Front – a coalition comprised of the communist Vietminh fighters and nationalist resistance brigades. The August conference adopted the national flag of a red field emblazoned with a gold star and a resolution calling on all to join in the movement for liberation. He signed the resolution as “Nguyen Ai Quoc” -- the last time that he would use that name.

The precise nature of the events which unfolded over the next thirty years is shrouded by the political leanings of those who have recorded them. It is undisputed, for example, that anarchy ensued on the heels of the collapse of the Japanese supported

imperial government. Indigenous “peoples tribunals” meted retribution, with vengeance focused largely on landlords and their families. Those sympathetic to the communist revolution estimate that some 3,000 were summarily executed. Anti-communist writers fix the estimate at five times that number.

The restored French government promptly moved to resume colonial control. The Allied plan adopted at the Potsdam Conference called for China to oversee the establishment of civil government in the North, while Britain would assume that role in the southern provinces. The United States had insisted that France be excluded.

The envisioned plan went awry, abetted by the emerging cold war tension. Alarmed by aggressive USSR control asserted in post-war Europe, Britain acceded to French encroachment.

Ho had anticipated bold moves by France and sought to negotiate. He put forth a proposal on behalf of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, which had become firmly established in the northern mountainous regions: True to his reputation as a pragmatist, the terms he advanced were modest. He proffered a peaceful return of French rule in exchange for negotiating eventual Vietnamese independence and territorial unification of the provinces. He sought independence within the French union.

France’s de Gaulle rejected the proposal immediately, insisting that return to colonial status occur prior to any negotiation. But to Ho, liberation was the priority – not as a matter of time but in principle. In his words, “Independence is the thing. What follows will follow. But independence must come first if there is to be anything to

follow later on.”

French diplomacy, as it were, was complicated by a rapid succession of changes of government. De Gaulle’s government would soon be ousted by a socialist parliament. The coin again flipped, not once but twice, and when a subsequent socialist government excluded the French Communist Party from coalition, the situation in Vietnam stagnated.

Western powers as well as the USSR and China were loath to intervene. The United States had granted independence to the Philippine protectorate, and Secretary of State Marshall criticized the French for maintaining an outmoded and dangerous policy of colonialism. Ho proposed that the U.S. and Britain broker a resolution: The French ambassador promptly informed Secretary Marshall that any U.S. intervention would be deemed an “unfriendly act.”

Ho sought to establish a united front and reached out to the Democratic Republic of Vietnam -- the nationalist government in the southern capital of Saigon. He was criticized by the ideological elements of his party who, consistent with Stalinist theory, disdained a united front. To them he responded: “Manure is dirty isn’t it. But if it’s good for the rice plants, would you refuse to use it?”

Representatives of the two governments met and agreed to form a new coalition National Assembly founded upon establishing independence and territorial integrity as a unified nation. Ho was elected president. As they met a French naval force departed Saigon and the following morning attempted to land troops at Haiphong

Harbor in northern Vietnam. Chinese occupying troops opened fire on the vessels, which was returned by the French. Although the conflict spread, both sides agreed to a cease fire and preliminary terms for a political settlement. A Paris conference was scheduled which convened in June 1946. The French arranged a formal, white-tie dinner for the delegations. Ho, who traveled with one change of clothes which he laundered himself, appeared in his customary khaki jacket and trousers. His one concession to formality was buttoning the top button on the jacket.

In his response to French President Bidault's remarks, Ho stated he was confident that both would be guided by the shared eastern and western philosophy that "you should not do to others what you do not want others to do to you."

The talks extended into September, but ended fruitlessly. Backpedaling from the temporary battlefield accord, France refused to consider Vietnamese independence or to agree to a firm date for holding a referendum on unification. Conflict resumed.

Although sporadic attempts at a negotiated settlement occurred they were overshadowed by perception that Ho was a mere puppet of Moscow. The escalating cold war - and French assertions that Ho was one and the same person as Quoc, the communist revolutionary - proved an impassable hurdle. French efforts of conquest ended at Dien Bein Phu when the fortress was overrun by the Vietminh troops.

The 1954 Geneva accords divided French Indochina into three countries: Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. Vietnam was temporarily subdivided by the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel, pending a referendum on the question of unification. That election did not occur.



Ngo Dinh Diem declared the new nation state of South Vietnam, and Ho solidified his control of the northern communist state. And the United States would ultimately be drawn into the protracted conflict that would endure until 1975, exacting a toll of 58,000 American lives and that of some 1.3 Million Vietnamese. The southern regime dissolved within days following the withdrawal of American forces. Vietnam was united as a single nation, the Socialistic Republic of Vietnam.

Ho did not live to see the realization of his quest. He died September 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1969 – the twenty-fourth anniversary of Vietnam’s Independence Day. His direct control of affairs had waned earlier. But, his devotion to the cause had achieved for him iconic status. Perhaps, this man of simple habits – who chose to live in a gardener’s cottage rather than the imperial palace – who elevated practical tactics above ideological purity – reinforced virtues which have influenced today’s Vietnam.

Our next chapter of Vietnamese history began in 1986 with the adoption of a program known as *doi moi*. The phrase means “change and newness” and ushered in radical economic reforms moving the nation toward a market economy. Key elements are reduction of the public sector and deregulation of areas of economic activity. The mixture of state owned enterprises and private entities has been described as “Authoritarian Capitalism” – an intriguing phrase that implies concession of socialistic ideology to realities of economics.

The process continues. Although state owned enterprises have preferred access to domestic borrowing, significant foreign investment, both debt and equity, has

supported private entities. Foreign investors are limited to ownership of no more than 49% of equities or, 30% if the domestic entity is a bank. The nation is classified as a “frontier market” , which is a grade below an “emerging market”. The market classification is based upon relative openness to foreign investors and the absence of extreme economic or political instability. Securities are traded on two exchanges, the Hanoi Exchange and the larger Ho Chi Minh City Stock Exchange.

In 2001 the Vietnamese government approved a bilateral trade agreement which opened U.S. markets to the nation’s output and permitted domestic competition from foreign firms. Six years later the nation became a member of the World Trade Organization.

These expressions of *doi moi* have achieved admirable results. During the 12 year period ended in 2013, per capita GDP increased ten-fold. The growth rate of the economy for the three year period ended 2014 averaged 5.5% Unemployment is estimated at less than 4%. Nearly half the workforce is employed in agriculture, which accounts for only 18% of the national output. Land laws were enacted in 1993 and 2013 which departed from collective ownership and granted land use rights to farmers and others. Those rights include the ability to transfer, inherit, rent and mortgage real estate.

The nation enjoys a favorable trade balance – which, according to some economists, positions it more favorably to weather the southeast Asian downturn compared to its neighboring countries.

And, a fact which I find most enlightening is the increase in literacy, estimated at a woeful 3% of the native colonial population and rising to 96.3% as of 2015.

The adaptation of western concepts of human rights, engrafted on Asian culture, is a yet evolving process. Breaking the colonial barrier was the initial step. But shedding the yoke of foreign domination would, it seems, call forth a nationalistic bent to preserve or reinvent indigenous cultural norms, many of which do not meet the approbation of western civilization. Perceived improvement in this area was instrumental in influencing the United States to enter into the 2001 bilateral trade agreement. As a member nation of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, Vietnam adopted the ASEAN Declaration of Human Rights in 2012. While the document affords a foundation for further development of individual liberties, it is largely aspirational. It has no bill of rights, such as would enable individual enforcement, and its provisions are subordinate to domestic law. For example, Article 23 states:

Every person has the right to freedom of opinion and expression, including freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and import information . . .

In practice, the Ministry of Information and Communication controls all broadcast media in Vietnam. But, as elsewhere, satellite access and social media is not susceptible of restraint.

The government is technically democratic in the sense of universal suffrage of all

persons age 18 – a promise that was made by Ho Chi Minh in 1945. The popularly elected 500 member National Assembly elects a president who in turn appoints the prime minister who must be a member of the Assembly. But, the Communist Party is the sole political organization accorded governmental recognition. The Party has repeatedly emphasized that *doi moi* does not contemplate, nor will it tolerate, a pluralistic political system. Yet the party has avoided rupture by its tendency to absorb and shape emerging ideas – using as well as bowing to tactics of coercion and negotiation. Thus it is thought that the Party itself has become internally pluralistic and that diverse interest groups wield negotiating power. It is error to view the Communist Party as a monolithic or homogeneous entity. The internal dynamics were known, understood and exploited by Ho Chi Minh.

*Doi moi* is a radical departure from communist ideology, but a pragmatic compromise of free market and socialistic systems. It is a fitting tribute to the legacy of a pragmatic patriot who employed maverick tactics to achieve the higher principle of liberty.