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HO CHI MINH

Ho Chi Minh is one of the towering figures of the twentieth century, considered an icon and father of the nation by many Vietnamese. Pierre Brocheux's biography of Ho Chi Minh is a brilliant feat of historical engineering. In a concise and highly readable account, he negotiates the many twists and turns of Ho Chi Minh's life and his multiple identities, from impoverished beginnings as a communist revolutionary to his founding of the Indochina Communist Party and the League for the Independence of Vietnam, and ultimately to his leadership of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and his death in 1969. Biographical events are adroitly placed within the broader historical canvas of colonization, decolonization, communism, war, and nation building. Brocheux's vivid and convincing portrait of Ho Chi Minh goes further than any previous biography in explaining both the myth and the man, as well as the times in which he was situated.

Pierre Brocheux is retired Professor of History at Université de Paris VII – Denis-Diderot. His previous publications include *The Mekong Delta: Ecology, Economy and Revolution, 1860–1960* (1995).

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A BIOGRAPHY

Pierre Brocheux

Université de Paris VII – Denis-Diderot

Translated by

Claire Duiker



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*This book is dedicated to the idealists of the world,
for whom history always ends in disappointment.*

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Foreword

By any measure, Ho Chi Minh was one of the most influential figures of his era. As a prominent member of the international communist movement, he helped to shape the strategy and tactics of the socialist community for nearly five decades. As the founder and leader of the Vietnamese Communist Party, he created a revolutionary organization that first brought an end to three-quarters of a century of French rule in Indochina and then was able to fight the powerful armed forces of the United States to a standstill, leading in 1975 to the unification of his country under communist rule. The process that he set in motion eventually changed the course of the Cold War and had a dramatic impact on American society as well. There are few people of the twentieth century whose life experience is more indelibly printed on his era.

Yet for all his worldwide notoriety, Ho Chi Minh has remained a figure of mystery and controversy. During his lifetime, adversaries and other observers of international politics debated interminably over his true character and intentions. Critics charged that he was a doctrinaire communist who sought to impose a Stalinist gulag on his compatriots. Sympathizers countered that he was a patriot dedicated above all to the reunification of his country and the creation of a society based on self-determination and social justice. At his death in 1969, he was one of the most revered figures in the world, and one of the most reviled.

Ho Chi Minh contributed to such controversy by his own behavior. During a revolutionary career that lasted nearly half a century, he adopted a number of pseudonyms designed to disguise his movements and his real identity from hostile authorities. After becoming president of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in the fall of 1945 (under the new pseudonym of Ho Chi Minh), he took an obvious delight in covering up his background as a career revolutionary, even from his own people. As a result, today there are still significant gaps that hinder the ability of biographers to trace his life trajectory with any degree of confidence.

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Ho Chi Minh was equally adept at disguising his true ideological convictions. Having begun his political career as a fervent Vietnamese patriot, he embraced communism shortly after settling in Paris at the end of World War I. From the outset, however, he was viewed in Moscow as a maverick, arguing that in colonial countries in Asia, national liberation from colonial rule had to take precedence over revolutionary transformation. Ho Chi Minh's dual allegiance to nationalism and social revolution is undoubtedly behind the slippery maneuverings to be all things to all people that he engaged in throughout his adult life. That he was not always successful in his efforts is demonstrated by the persistent charges – from both sides of the ideological spectrum – that he was an opportunist and a hypocrite. Among those who doubted his ideological conviction were no less than his fellow revolutionaries Joseph Stalin and Mao Zedong. It is the daunting and often thankless task of the biographer to penetrate the mask and find the real man inside.

With *Ho Chi Minh: Du révolutionnaire à l'icône*, published by Éditions Payot & Rivages in Paris in 2003, Pierre Brocheux has become the most recent biographer seeking to untangle the complex threads of Ho Chi Minh's life. A respected historian well versed in the modern history of Vietnam, he is supremely qualified to undertake the task. Faced, like his many predecessors, with closed archives in Moscow, Beijing, and Hanoi, as well as Ho Chi Minh's own chronic reticence about personal matters, Brocheux has sensibly refrained from engaging in the kind of psychohistorical speculation that has characterized so many other political biographies in recent years. He is not averse, however, to offering informed judgments on some of the key issues that have provoked debate among students of the Vietnam War. On the central issue of Ho Chi Minh's core political beliefs, for example, he rejects the simplistic extremes of doctrinaire Marxism and simple patriotism, offering instead a balanced portrait of an astute mind capable of weaving together the strands of nationalism and social revolution into a complex political strategy.

Brocheux is equally persuasive in tracing the course of Ho Chi Minh's intellectual development. While conceding that as an adolescent Ho had initially been impressed with the humanistic tradition of the European Enlightenment, he suggests that it was his childhood exposure to Confucian moral and political philosophy – with its emphasis on communal responsibility and the perfectibility of Man – that led him, in the disillusioned years following World War I, to the siren call of Marxism-Leninism. In Ho Chi Minh's eyes, Karl Marx represented the realization

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of Confucian ideals in a modern historical context. As the author has pointed out, however, the failure in his later years to grasp the pitfalls in Marx's utopian vision was not only a serious blemish on Ho Chi Minh's character but also a tragic event in the modern history of the Vietnamese nation.

In this sensitive and often elegant biography, author Pierre Brocheux manages to bring into sharp relief some of the personal and ideological characteristics that have made Ho Chi Minh one of the most important and influential figures of the twentieth century.

William J. Duiker
The Pennsylvania State University

Preface

This is not the first biography of Ho Chi Minh; others have been published in French, English, and Russian.¹ The American historian Alexander Woodside has thus questioned the validity of and interest in writing another biography while certain periods of the subject's life are still obscure and questions remain about the man even today.² Moreover, when the crimes of Stalin and Mao Zedong were brought to light, Ho Chi Minh suffered by association, and he was relegated by some to the ranks of the murderous red tyrants of the twentieth century.

Difficult to categorize, Ho Chi Minh has not been granted the intellectual depth of a political thinker, the creative genius of a writer, or the skill of a military strategist, and so one may question the importance of this “frail Annamite” who rose up to become leader of his people and head of state. What gave rise to the aura that surrounded him from a young age? In what way was he a symbol, deserving a place among the gallery of great men? It is especially hard to answer these questions now, because the man of flesh and blood has become a “man of marble.” There are statues of Ho not only in his own country but also in Moscow, where his sculpted figure stands in one of the city squares, as well as in Antananarivo, the capital of Madagascar. And in Thailand, Vietnamese nationals have erected a shrine in his honor in Nachok, near Nakhon-Phanom, which was listed as a national monument by the local authorities in 2003. In his native land, Ho has become an object of veneration, literally, in temples dedicated to village spirits, national heroes, bodhisattvas, and even the Cao Dai.³

In addition to the images, rites, and teachings that celebrate and spread his memory, his embalmed body is on display for respectful pilgrims and curious tourists. It is laid out in an oppressive mausoleum that Ho himself had rejected in his Testament. He had wanted his ashes put into urns, to be placed at the four cardinal points of the country.⁴ Obviously, then, Communist leaders and his most devout admirers made use of his mortal

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remains and memorialized him for their own purposes, to serve the state or factional interests.

In Ho Chi Minh's case, the cult of personality – because it truly is a cult – had little or nothing to do with his own wishes but was the work of his entourage. The cult has today been institutionalized, and “Ho Chi Minh thought” has been taught officially in schools since 1997. It was meant to replace the Marxist-Leninist doctrine that fell out of favor after the disintegration of the socialist camp, since communist ideology has now become “localized” or has simply given way to a pragmatism in search of a new doctrinal reference point.

For the last seven years or so, a whole host of works dedicated to Ho Chi Minh – more like monuments than documents – have appeared in Vietnam, complicating the biographer's task even further. The recently opened Soviet archives, specifically those dealing with the Third International (the Comintern), did not provide as much information as historians had hoped. And the crucial documents from the Chinese archives, released only in that language and relatively unknown in Europe, were used by the Chinese to glorify their own role in bringing victory to the Vietnamese Communists in their struggle for national liberation.

We historians dream of a day in the not-too-distant future when we will have free access to the Kremlin archives and the former Soviet security apparatus (the GPU) in Moscow, as well as to the archives in the Ho Chi Minh Institute and the Ho Chi Minh Museum in Hanoi. But for the time being these sources remain closed, or consultation is permitted only after careful screening. Moreover, some aspects of the life of the “Great National Hero” are still off-limits. For example, a few years ago the official state publishing house in Hanoi wanted to publish a translation of the biography by the American historian William Duiker, but only on condition that they delete certain episodes that did not conform to official dogma. The same criticism was leveled at this biography two years later when a translation in Vietnamese was halted because of certain references to Ho's personal life. Both authors refused to comply with the demands for censorship.

ANY HISTORIAN WHO WISHES TO FOLLOW THE TRACKS OF HO CHI MINH IS often frustrated, because the places where he lived and worked have changed and are still changing at a vertiginous pace. In Paris, the Impasse Compoint in the 20th arrondissement was razed to the ground in the 1980s to make room for an apartment complex, and in Moscow, the building that held the famed Stalin School closed its doors long ago. Only

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the Chinese have preserved the past: There are memorials for the headquarters of the Revolutionary Youth League (Thanh Nien) in Canton and for the liaison office of the 8th Route Army in Nanning, and the museums of Guilin and Nanning have collections tracing the Vietnamese presence in Guangxi province. However, will the city planners of Kunming respect the “Indochina” tea house, home to the Vietnamese Communists where Ho met with the American lieutenant Charles Fenn in March 1945? And along the route from Pac Bo to Liuzhou, where Ho and his comrades set up their revolutionary network of camps and meeting places, the market villages have barely changed over the years, but for how much longer?⁵

This book does not necessarily provide new answers to questions raised by the life of Ho Chi Minh, nor does it defend a reputation that has been darkened by the crimes of Stalinism and Maoism, which tarnished all those fighting for the communist ideal. It is, rather, an attempt to situate the evolution of a man in the twentieth century. Ho Chi Minh had his virtues, illusions, weaknesses, and faults like everyone else; as he once said to his friends, “I am a normal man.”

Ho Chi Minh lived in a century that saw not only the confrontation among nations but also the clash and interaction among the world’s great civilizations. Thus, from East to West and back again, it is worth following Ho throughout his century. After all, millions of people were making the same journey.

I WOULD LIKE TO THANK EVERYONE WHO SHARED THEIR INFORMATION WITH me: Dao Hung (Hanoi), Do Quang Hung (Hanoi), D. Foulon (Lyon), C. Goscha (Montreal), D. Hémery (Paris), J. Kleinen (Amsterdam), Ngo Manh Lan (Paris), Nguyen Ngoc Giao (Paris), and A. Sokolov (Moscow). Many thanks also to Professors Philippe Devillers (Paris) and Dinh Xuan Lam (Hanoi) who rightly pointed out some errors.

I am grateful to Nicolas Offenstadt and Sophie Bajart (Paris) for having stimulated and encouraged my interest in Ho Chi Minh’s life, and to Marie-Martine Serrano (Paris), Marigold Acland, and Isabelle Dambri-court (Cambridge), without whom this English version would not exist. I must not forget Phyllis Berk, who polished up the text during the final phase of this edition. If I have forgotten anybody in this acknowledgment, I beg her or his pardon.

And last but not least, I appreciate very much the careful work of translation by Claire Duiker and the critical attention of William Duiker, as well as his friendly foreword.

Translator's Note

To simplify the difficulties of rendering the tones of the Vietnamese language into English, accents and diacritical marks have been dropped. Vietnamese names are listed in the index by the family name (i.e., Vo Nguyen Giap is under Vo, Ho Chi Minh under Ho).

Many of the works cited from the Vietnamese have not been translated into either French or English. If no translated source is given, the Vietnamese was translated into French by the author, and then rendered into English by the translator. Where translations are available, I have included them in the Bibliography, leaving the original language text and page numbers in the Notes.

Every effort has been made to secure permissions to reproduce copyright material in this work, though in some cases it has proved impossible to trace copyright holders. If any omissions are brought to our notice, we will be happy to include appropriate acknowledgments in reprints or future editions.

As always, I thank my father for his continued help and patience. I am also grateful to my cousin, Kevin Phillips, for his editorial assistance. Uncle Ho has now truly become a part of the family.

Abbreviations

ACRONYMS

- AGAS Air Ground Aid Services
- ATK An Toan Khu – the “zone of total security”
- CAOM Centre des Archives d’Outre-Mer, in Aix-en-Provence, France
- CEFEO Corps Expéditionnaire Français en Extrême-Orient
- CCP Chinese Communist Party
- CGT Confédération Générale du Travail (major French confederation of trade unions)
- CLI “Light Intervention Corps”
- CPSU Communist Party of the Soviet Union
- ICP Indochinese Communist Party
- DRV Democratic Republic of Vietnam
- EDC European Defense Community
- FCP French Communist Party
- FSP French Socialist Party
- GBT (acronym for L. L. Gordon, Harry Bernard, and Frank Tan)
- GPU *Gosudartsvenoïe politicheskoïe upravlenic* (Political Police in the Soviet Union, 1922–34)
- ICC International Control Commission (set up to supervise the application of the Geneva Accords in Indochina after 1954)
- KUTV (Russian acronym for the University of the Toilers of the East [the Stalin School])
- MRP People’s Republican Movement (or French Christian Democracy)
- NEP New Economic Policy

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- NKVD *Narodnyi Komissariat vnoutrennykh del*, People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs (successor to GPU from 1934 to 1946)
 NLF National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam
 OSS Office of Strategic Services
 PAVN People's Army of Vietnam
 POUM (Spanish) Workers' Party of Marxist Unification
 PRC People's Republic of China
 ROSTA (Soviet News Agency)
 SEAC Southeast Asia Command
 SFIC French Section of the Communist International
 SFIO French Section of the Workers' International
 VCP Vietnamese Communist Party
 VNQDD Viet Nam Quoc Dan Dang (National-Democratic Party of Vietnam)
 VWP Vietnamese Workers' Party

LITERARY SOURCES

- APP Archives de la Préfecture de Police de Paris
 BEFEO Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-orient
 BNTS *Bien nien tieu su*, chronology of Ho Chi Minh's activities
 CAOM, Agence FOM Agence de la France d'Outre-mer
 CAOM, GGI, CM Gouvernement general de l'Indochine, Commission militaire
 CAOM, HCI Haut commissariat en Indochine
 CAOM, Indo NF nouveau fonds Indochine
 CAOM, RST Résidence Supérieure du Tonkin
 CAOM, SLOTFOM Service de Liaison des Originaires des Territoires d'Outre-Mer
 CAOM, SPCE Service de Protection du Corps Expéditionnaire
 ÉLÉ Éditions en Langues Étrangères, in Hanoi
 FLP Foreign Languages Press

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MEP Missions étrangères de Paris

NXB Nha Xuat Ban (Publishing House)

NXB CTQG Nha xuất bản chính trị quốc gia (State Political Publishing House)

QDNZ Quân Đội Nhân Dân (People's Army, referring to NXB QDNZ: People's Army's Publishing House)

RFHOM, Revue française d'Histoire d'Outre-mer

RHMC Revue d'Histoire Moderne et Contemporaine

RHSGM Revue d'Histoire de la Seconde Guerre Mondiale

SHAT Services Historiques de l'Armée de Terre at Vincennes