



Between Theory and Praxis: Ho Chi Minh's Parisian Networks, Intellectual Production and Evolving Thought

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ABSTRACT

The writings of Ho Chi Minh have obviously gone through many officially approved refinements but, as this article queries, what were his prime intellectual influences during his formative years in France between mid-1919 and mid-1923, at least the most transformative period of his life? What were his signature publications during this period? How do they fit into the Marxist-Leninist lexicon and how do they translate into his “thought?” To answer these questions the article gives special attention to Ho Chi Minh’s research and writing in Paris of a manuscript that would only see publication in 1926 albeit, as discussed in a conclusion, one of several possible versions, yet in fact his magnum opus. As the article also sets down, no less important in charting his future direction were a broader spectrum of activities and influences in Paris, namely his little-studied liaisons with others from French colonies in forging anti-colonial, anti-imperialist networks and strategies.

KEY WORDS

Ho Chi Minh; Paris; anti-colonial writings; Marxism-Leninism; political praxis

The study of “Ho Chi Minh Thought” is not an idle issue as it is practically mainstreamed in schools and other institutions in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam today. Biographical studies of Ho Chi Minh conventionally attribute his conversion to Bolshevism upon reading a summary of Lenin’s *Theses on the National and Colonial Questions* in a French newspaper and his own writing admits as much. Nevertheless, a full assessment of the evolution of Ho Chi Minh’s political “thought” as it evolved during his worker-“student” days in France between mid-1919 and mid-1923 should examine a broader spectrum of his activities, including the anti-colonial networks that he helped to build. This is important as he was particularly concerned that, even as a founder member of the Parti communiste français (PCF), the party still ignored the colonies. This he sought to rectify by joining with other colonial subjects, not only Asians but Arabs, Africans, (French) West Indians and Madagascans in a PCF-linked collective, in turn launching its own newspaper, *Le Paria*. But even earlier he was connecting with Koreans especially and Chinese delegates arriving in France to attend the Paris Peace Conference of 1919–1920 which inaugurated the international settlement after World War I.

Activism aside, an important part of Ho Chi Minh’s life in Paris was study, preparing a manuscript which he titled *Les Opprimés*, only to have the book project rejected by the PCF press. He later worked on this in Moscow and a version was subsequently published

in Paris. The corpus of his writings have obviously gone through many officialised refinements but, as this article queries, what were Ho Chi Minh's prime intellectual influences during his formative years in France? How did they translate into his "thought?" And, how, in turn, would his research and writing inform his signature publications during this creative period. Indeed, to what extent did he draw from the Marxist-Leninist lexicon?

The first section of this article examines Ho Chi Minh's earliest contacts in Paris, foundational actually, if we are to understand his fast-evolving worldview. A second section focuses upon his research, writing and publications, logging the progress towards his embrace of Lenin. A third section examines his turn to internationalism as with his participation in an anti-colonial organisation dubbed the Union Intercoloniale and editorship of the newspaper *Le Paria*. In a final section, the article offers an evaluation of his signature publication, *Le Procès de la colonisation française* (French Colonialism on Trial), ostensibly the fruits of his research and writing conducted between 1919 and 1921 but only published in 1926. Paired with an unpublished version residing in Comintern archives, a conclusion speculates on the editorial processes leading to the 1926 publication.

Ho Chi Minh's Earliest Contacts in Paris

The new peace in Europe in the aftermath of World War I found many stay-behind colonials in the major capitals. Indochina had supplied France with 15 infantry battalions comprising over 40,000 soldiers along with some 50,000 workers. Major contingents were also supplied from France's African colonies, in addition to Chinese and other nationalities. Most were quickly repatriated but others were stranded in France or put down roots through marriage, by working or as students, and they would be joined by contingents of student-workers arriving post-war (see Blanc 2004; Le Van Ho 2014, Gunn 2014a). When Ho Chi Minh arrived in Paris from London in June 1919 or perhaps even earlier, and still going by his boyhood name, Nguyễn Tất Thành, he met some of them. He deplored their treatment and, in one letter-to-the-editor published in the PCF newspaper, *L'Humanité* (November 5, 1920), he denounced French plans to deploy colonial troops to Syria, declaring: "Wasn't there sufficient suffering of our unfortunate yellow brothers massacred in the battlefields between 1914–1918 ... for civilization and rights?"

Ho Chi Minh's primary networks were undoubtedly his compatriots and much has been written about the support he received in Paris from the Groupe des Patriotes Annamites (with "Annamite" the then current usage for Vietnamese), with their address at 6 Villa des Gobelins in the 13th district. Sometimes known as the "Five Dragons," they comprised veteran anti-colonial activists, the Confucian scholar Phan Châu Trinh to whom Ho had corresponded prior to arriving in Paris, the lawyer Phan Văn Trường with whom he shared broad political views, along with the later-arriving scholarship student, Nguyễn Thế Truyền accredited with introducing Ho Chi Minh to socialist thought, and Nguyễn An Ninh a law student at the Sorbonne from 1918 although departing France in 1922. A full portrait of the younger Ho Chi Minh, now going by the name Nguyễn Ái Quốc (or Nguyễn the Patriot), cannot be drawn without examining his many contacts with progressive French circles; socialists, communists and anarchists included (see Duiker 2000; Quinn-Judge 2002; Brocheux 2007; Borton 2007; Ruscio 2019). Despite

the abundant literature on Ho Chi Minh in Paris, however, far less attention has been devoted to yet another circle or network to which he related, namely other Asians and colonials (see Goebel 2015).

Ho Chi Minh and the Paris Peace Conference

Neither should we neglect the landmark events which brought Ho Chi Minh both to public and official attention, as with his petition to the Paris Peace Conference and, no less dramatically, his attendance at the Tours Congress of the French Socialist Party of December 12, 1920, out of which the PCF emerged in solidarity with the Third International. As is well known, on January 18, 1918, US President Woodrow Wilson announced 14 principles as conditions to establish peace and bring closure to World War I. Of great interest to the peoples of the colonised world was the announced principle of self-determination. Various groups and peoples responded to this call by either attending the conference or sending petitions. Ho Chi Minh would follow. Practically from obscurity, on June 18, 1919, and signed off as “Nguyen Ai Quak,” he sent a petition to President Wilson and other delegation leaders at Versailles as well as to leading French statesmen. Known as “Revendications du Peuple Annamite” (Demands of the Vietnamese People), and collectively drafted by the Groupe des Patriotes, this was a relatively moderate set of demands for rights and autonomy short of independence, yet it still rankled the French who were not keen to have their own colonialism raised at the conference (ANOM SLOTFOM XVI Notes d’agents 1920; Duiker 2000, 59–60).

This initiative went nowhere, leading Ho Chi Minh in later years to describe Wilson’s invitation as a smokescreen or a play to “deceive” the petitioners (Reilly 2019). Even so, as Reilly asserts, it is not so much that he suffered a “Wilsonian moment” as some historians have declared. Rather, as Versailles concluded, Ho Chi Minh was already at work convincing French socialists to join Lenin’s Third International. In any case, with copies of “Revendications” also appearing on the streets of Paris in the form of handbills, he literally launched his revolutionary career, both engaging French officialdom directly while also attracting official attention and surveillance.

Less well known is the petition telegraphed direct to the conference on February 12, 1919, by Prince Cường Đễ then in China and signed in the name of the Annam Restoration Society or Delegate of the Vietnamese Independence Party. The prince also had his petition published in several newspapers in China (Tran 2005, 100). As an embittered scion of the House of Annam who had fallen in with anti-French literati, Phan Bội Châu, the two landed in Tokyo seeking support from Japan for their struggle. Nevertheless, the prince’s petition to the conference received no response. As explained by French Police Agent Jean (who appeared to have access to the inner circles of the conference), the petition escaped attention because it “was enclosed inside several Chinese papers relating to China” [it] (ANOM SLOTFOM XVI Notes d’agents 1920). As a pre-condition to attend the conference, the concerned petitioners were obliged to represent a government or provisional government. And so, reading between the lines, it appears that Cường Đễ’s petition was indeed facilitated by the Chinese delegate to the conference whom at least had standing but who may also have been restrained by the rules. It is hard to know.

Korean Networks

One of the first “stakeholders” to respond to Wilson’s announcement was a group of Korean exiles based in Shanghai including the Christian nationalist, Yi Seung-man (Syngman Rhee). In March 1919, the group sent a delegation to Paris under the name of the Provisional Government of the Republic of Korea. With Kim Gyu-sik as head, accompanied by Kim Tang, Yeo Un-hong and Jo So-Ang (also known as Cho Soang), they remained in Paris for two years and four months. Although Kim Gyu-sik would make an early departure, in turn, he would be replaced by Earl K. Whang (Whang Ki-whan), a Korean-American who had served in the US Army in France during the war. In Paris, Whang published documents and launched a monthly review titled *La Corée libre*, until returning to New York where he died of a heart attack in 1923 (Anonymous 2019). The Koreans in Paris were organised to the point where they operated a publicity office adjacent to the Avenue des Champs-Élysées. Some of their materials were in English and likely produced in the USA. Ho Chi Minh’s diary record for December 20, 1919, reveals that on that day he paid a visit to the “Korean Committee” (ANOM HCI SPCE 367 Relevé du carnet de notes).

With several of the Korean independence groups influenced by US Protestant missionaries, as Bourdeaux (2012, 2013) points out, Ho Chi Minh learned that Protestants could be allies in the struggle against colonialism (although they could also transgress across cultures and this worried him greatly). As it turns out, some among Ho Chi Minh’s Paris circle were Protestants, including Madagascans and some of his French socialist and communist allies. It is also true, that the years 1920–1921 were a time when Ho Chi Minh reached out to an eclectic set of experiences and influences – radical socialism, communism, anarcho-syndicalism, libertarianism, masonism, Protestantism – when it suited him. When it did not suit, he was anti-clerical, especially in the interest of building networks (Bourdeaux 2012–2013, 307). Space precludes a systematic elaboration of all these influences but, as the article argues, personal networks also counted.

Little is known about the time spent by Ho Chi Minh in the USA including time adrift in New York prior to moving on to Boston before travelling to London (Duiker 2000, 50–51; Borton 2007, 25–33). Nevertheless, we can adduce that he first made contact with Korean anti-colonial activists in the USA during this period. Quinn-Judge (2001, 27) believes it most likely occurred in 1917–1918 and her research is singular in pointing to this connection. If so, then it helps to explain how in Paris Ho Chi Minh soon fell in with a Korean named Kim Tchong Wen (likely a pseudonym). In fact, so little is known about these missing years on the seas and in the USA that the Kim connection is one of the few corroborating his presence on the continent. The US-based Kim, we may presume, was attracted to Paris in the run up to the Paris Peace Conference. In any case, Ho Chi Minh and Kim were in close contact and it is also likely that Kim coached Ho Chi Minh on lobbying the conference. It may be speculated, as well, that he was tutored on the efficacy of pseudonyms as none of his Vietnamese circle in Paris adopted this ruse.

French authorities observed that Ho Chi Minh subscribed to *La Corée libre*, which he obviously studied. As also noted, on September 4, 1919, he published in the Socialist Party organ, *Le Populaire*, an article titled “L’Indochine et la Corée – Une Intéressante comparaison.” Somewhat misguided, he tended to believe that Japan was more progressive than France in drafting a timetable for political devolution in Korea.

Thanks to his Korean contact, he also managed to have two articles published in a newspaper in China stating his position on Vietnam. “Continuation de la campagne en faveur des Annamites,” appeared on September 18–20, 1919, in the Tianjin newspaper *Yi Che Pau*, a forerunner to the *Ta Kung Pao*. The article also carried an interview between himself and Kim, who styled himself the representative of the Provisional Government of Korea and an “American.” As the article stated, whereas the Japanese in Korea sought to “Japanise” the Koreans, in Indochina the French sought to permanently maintain inequality. On January 8, 1920, Ho Chi Minh attended a conference on China and Korea hosted by the Ligue des Droits de L’Homme (League of Rights). Kim was also present along with a number of Chinese, Koreans and Japanese (ANOM SLOTFOM XVI; HCI SPCE 367 Relevé du carnet de notes).

As Agent Jean – likely a Vietnamese in the pay of the French – wrote on January 2, 1920, Ho Chi Minh “modelled” himself on “the Korean agitator” Kim (ANOM SLOTFOM XVI 1921). This comment is not without interest because the Koreans in Paris were well established, well organised, calling themselves socialists, and were making political waves. What was their model to be emulated? As mentioned, Korean independence activists in the USA were an early influence. In Paris, he must have seen that the Korean delegates to the Peace Conference received support from China. He must also have seen that a Provisional Government operating in Shanghai and also in Paris worked to good effect. Vietnamese anti-colonial activists were not at that stage of preparedness, but such thinking could have influenced Ho Chi Minh’s later decision to set up in Guangzhou. In Paris he saw how the Koreans mastered propaganda, publicity and fund-raising, through the production of documents and a monthly newspaper. He could also see how they staged events drawing in large numbers of attendees and how they attended important international conferences in Europe to promote their views. Undoubtedly, as well, he could perceive the wellsprings of their nationalism and moral outrage; and all of this outside apparent Bolshevik inspiration, although that would change as well. And, all too obvious, where he had petitioned for “autonomy,” the Koreans were calling for independence.

Another of Ho Chi Minh’s Korean contacts from December 1919 was Jo So-Ang who, as mentioned, was a senior Korean delegate to the Peace Conference (Li 2007). He was an early supporter of Korean independence dating back to a declaration made in China in February 1919 and later in Japan.¹ Like other Korean activists in France, Jo disguised his name, wary of surveillance by the Japanese Legation in Paris and/or harassment on the part of the French authorities such as already transpired in Shanghai and other locations. Up to a point, this strategy worked because, initially, he was profiled by French police agents as a Thai or Cambodian going by the name “Tjosowang” and, subsequently, as a 32-year-old student born in Kirin (Jilin). He had lodged at 159 Boul. Montparnasse before putting up at 6 Guy Lussac from November 18. This was the address of the Hotel Athens where, in the afternoon of December 25, 1919, Ho Chi Minh along with Phan Châu Trinh paid him a visit. As observed by French Agent Arnoux, three more Vietnamese joined them – practically a delegation – so his importance was understood (ANOM SLOTFOM XVI, December 26, 1919). No more direct meetings were recorded but introductions had been made. From his temporary base in Paris, Jo went on to promote Korean independence at international socialist meetings in Lucerne and Amsterdam before leaving for Moscow (Li 2007). With a view to secure funding for a

future Korean socialist party, he also extended his networks to the USA. To achieve this, as Cha (2010, 124) relates, Jo successfully tapped into Korean immigrant farmhand networks in California, raising an extraordinary sum of 26,590 francs duly remitted to Paris.

Chinese Connections?

Ho Chi Minh's Chinese connection in Paris was twofold. First, he was brought into contact with Nationalist China's top diplomat in France over representations made to the Paris Conference and he would continue to remain on personal terms for a couple of years. He also had dealings with the Chinese Legation. For example, in relation to some business relating to a Chinese compatriot by the name Ah San, Ho Chi Minh entered into correspondence with the Chinese Vice Consul (ANOM HCI SPCE 364 Correspondence et Notes 1921). This was prudent and pragmatic. If any country could help to achieve Vietnam's salvation, then it was China. Indeed, after moving on from Paris to Moscow in mid-1923, he almost immediately sought to remove himself to revolutionary Guangzhou under the Sun Yat-sen government. Undoubtedly, he also came to know of Chinese student reaction to the failure of Chinese diplomats at Versailles after Japan was rewarded with the German concessions in Shandong, leading to student protests in Beijing on May 4, 1919 (the May Fourth Movement).

Ho Chi Minh's second point of contact with Chinese in Paris likely built upon connections that he made during his long sojourn in London via the Chinese Overseas Workers' Association (Fall 1967, vii). Copies of his diary coming into French police hands reveal that he kept up correspondence with some of this network in England, just as he made new acquaintances among the many settled and arriving Chinese in Paris. Likely, he met some at political meetings and yet others at the various Chinese restaurants which he and his compatriots frequented. Unknown to him, all these Chinese restaurants were under French police surveillance.

As tracked by the French police, in April 1921 Ho Chi Minh had received a copy of a Chinese-language newspaper issued by the *L'Association chinoise* with its address at no. 39 rue de la Pointe, Garenne Colombes. This was the industrial area in the north-west of Paris where the young Deng Xiaoping set up the same month working at the Le Creusot Iron and Steel Plant. Along with a contingent of his compatriots, Deng left China for France on September 11, 1920, on the ship *André Lebon*, arriving at Marseille on October 19. Ranging in age from 15 to 25, his group were met by an envoy of the Société d'Education franco-chinoise (SEFC). Through April–May, Ho Chi Minh regularly received copies of the SEFC's Chinese newspaper (ANOM HCI SPCE 364 Correspondence et notes 1921). As Barman and Dulioust (1988, 21–22) explain, the Garenne Colombes address was actually a general “letterbox” for students under the SEFC and subsequently for the Comité Franco-Chinoise (CFC) vested with the distribution of relief to distressed student workers – Deng Xiaoping included – as economic conditions deteriorated and with many left unemployed. In reality, according to Bensacq-Tixier (2014, 221–227), the essential goals of the official Franco-Chinese associations were to keep watch over the political parties in tandem with the French police including the approximately 1,000 pro-communists among Chinese workers. On his

part, working by day in a Renault plant after work, Deng drew up, printed, and circulated Chinese-language communist propaganda (*La Jeunesse nouvelle* or *L'aube rouge*). Ho Chi Minh was privy to this literature.

The Republic of China's delegation at the Paris Conference included medical doctor Scie Ton-Fa. A Sino-French *métis* born in Paris in 1880, he obtained Chinese nationality in 1902 when visiting Shanghai. Described as popular among the Vietnamese community in Paris, he was also in close contact with the Gobelins circle. In some documents Scie is described as the "special secretary of the Chinese Legation in Paris" yet, at the same time, he was a member of a circle named "justice supranationale" in favour of the rights of Chinese and other Asians. French agents could not make up their minds as to Ho Chi Minh's relationship with Scie. One report describes him as a "friend," another as "not especially a friend," except that they were brought together in some business activities – the procurement of photographic supplies – in which the Gobelins group engaged (ANOM HCI SPCE 364 Correspondence et notes Paris, April 1, 1920).

Intriguingly, Scie bonded with Jo So-ang. At this time, in November 1919, 25 Korean workers arrived in France, followed by 20 students arriving early in 1920. Likely with the initiative of the Japanese Legation in Paris, they were grouped under the "Association des résidents coreéens en France." However, working together, Scie and Jo set up a committee to create an alternative circle, known as "Les Amis de la Corée" with headquarters in Scie's apartment at 93 Bd. Hausseman. They met on June 23 at the Musée social, with Scie reading an apology letter from Jean Longuet, editor of the pro-communist newspaper *Le Populaire* and Marx's grandson (Li 2007). The pro-independence Bureau d'Information Coréen was then located at 38, rue de Châteaudun, in the 9th district, although it began to fade in 1920 owing to lack of funding from the Shanghai-based Provisional Government.

Ho Chi Minh was certainly aware of a demonstration mounted by some hundred Chinese students in front of the Chinese Legation in Paris on September 19, 1921, many arriving from outside the French capital claiming to have been abandoned by their government as well as France. Part of a push by China, hundreds of students had been dispatched to France in late 1920 but economic crisis at home and bureaucratic ineptitude left them without stipends. While the Chinese minister in Paris, Cheng Le, went as far as paying their travel costs to an exam centre in provincial Lyon as a way of getting them off the streets, the French government responded on October 15, 1921, by repatriating 500 to China and seeking compensation from the Chinese government. Still, 3,000 student-workers remained in Paris and suburbs or worked in factories outside the capital (Bensacq-Tixier 2014, 221–227).

The notion that Ho Chi Minh and Zhou Enlai bonded in Paris has been debated. It is true that, in 1923, Zhou rented an apartment adjacent the Gobelins address (Goebel 2015, 1–2, 105). This was still an occasional meeting place for Vietnamese activists even though Ho had moved out following serious arguments doubtless contrary to the reformist line still upheld by his seniors. According to Bensacq-Tixier (2014, 221–227), among the Chinese student demonstrators in Paris was a man named Wu Hao who, part of the repatriation convoy sent by train to Marseille, escaped and made his way back to Paris. Only later was his name connected with that of Zhou Enlai. Having first arrived in France in December 1920, Zhou spent a short time working at Renault at Billancourt before enrolling in a provincial language school. Moving on to Berlin in 1922, in February 1923 he was elected secretary general of the Chinese Communist Youth League in Europe,

before moving back to Paris (Lee 1994, 158–162). Around him, in turn, gravitated such Chinese Communist Party (CCP) luminaries as Chen Yi, Ye Jianying, Nie Rongzhen, who worked at Creusot and then Renault and, lastly, Zhu De, who arrived in France in 1922 before moving on to Germany. In this narrative, the major meeting place for these radicals was the address of a printshop run by the French communist Henri Lozeray (Bensacq-Tixier 2014, 221–227). Evidently a confidant of Ho Chi Minh, Lozeray was long active in socialist youth activities before joining the PCF. To place this Chinese activism into context, the founding National Congress of the CCP was only held in Shanghai on July 23–31, 1921. Ho Chi Minh acknowledged these developments and published an article in *L'Humanité* (August 19, 1922) titled, “Le communisme et les jeunes chinois,” saluting the birth of the movement in China under the hammer and sickle flag (Ruscio 2019, 93).

Asian workers were also active. For example, on January 3, 1920, a person named Sia Lei, styling himself Secretary General of the Association des Travailleurs Chinois (based at 39 rue de la Ponte) drew a crowd of 1,000, half of them Asians, mostly Chinese, but with around 20 Vietnamese and several Koreans and Japanese at a conference held at the Société Géographe on 184 Boul. St. Germain. Also attending was Earl K. Whang representing the “Republic of Corea Committee.” Stirring speeches were delivered touching on Korea and Shandong. Indochina was mentioned but Ho Chi Minh was denied a platform (ANOM SLOTFOM XVI 1920 Note d’Agents, January 9, 1929). As Whang declaimed at the meeting, Koreans “will fight against Japan until we achieve our independence.” In an interview with *La Petite République*, he declared: “What [Koreans] are calling for is not autonomy or the reform that Japan insists on but the transfer of the sovereignty Japan has robbed from us to the Korean exile government” (Anonymous 2019). Yet another student cohort arriving in Paris during this period were the Thai, with Pridi Banomyong, a future leader of the 1932 revolution against the absolute monarchy, among them (Vichitvong 1962, 48–49).

Other Connections

As his notoriety in French intellectual circles grew along with his left-wing and anti-colonial networks, Ho Chi Minh would himself attract the attention of like-minded thinkers and anti-colonial activists. This included the pro-independence Indian agitator, Amitabha Ghose. Born in Calcutta in 1897 and a resident of the French colonial enclave of Pondicherry, he enlisted in the French army and served in France, and as a war veteran gained French naturalisation. From July 27, 1919, he launched the newspaper *Bulletin d’Information Indienne* with a view to promoting Indian independence. By June 1921, 50 issues had been released, with a circulation of around 1,000. Ghose preferred to post out copies by mail to influential people rather than sell at the usual outlets. Identified by the French police authorities as politically leaning to revolutionary socialism, he was also a member of the 5th Section of the Federation of Socialist Parties and the Ligue des Droits de L’Homme, and it was this latter association that first brought him into contact with Ho Chi Minh. Following an exchange of letters with Ho Chi Minh in mid-1921, Ghose was in contact with the Gobelins group. Notwithstanding all his efforts and contacts, in the estimation of the French police, he made little headway in his activities (ANOM HCI SPCE 364 Correspondence et notes, Devèze, June 8, 1921).

Japanese student Komatsu Kiyoshi, who arrived in Marseilles from Japan in late 1921, was another attracted to early post-war France, ostensibly to study language and literature. Yet, no sooner had Komatsu arrived in Paris than, on October 23, he met Ho Chi Minh at a speaking session in support of two Italian anarchists condemned to death in the USA. For Ho Chi Minh, Komatsu was a rare source on labour conditions in Japan (ANOM HCI SPCE 364 Note de M. Devèze du Octobre 26, 1921; December 13, 1921). At the same session, the militant seaman and syndicalist Lê Văn Thuyét (Léon) was also present. He not only stayed at Ho Chi Minh's address at 9 Impasse Compoin in the 17th district when visiting Paris, but was in regular mail contact during his voyage to Rio de Janeiro, coinciding with an anarcho-syndicalist-inspired dock strike there in early 1921 (see Dulles 1974, Ch. 15; Gunn 2022).

Besides penning critical press pieces upon the French protectorate of Annam, on June 11, 1922, Ho Chi Minh successfully staged a theatre piece he wrote titled, *Le Dragon en bambou*, a spoof on the visit to France by Annam Emperor Khai Dinh (r.1916–1925), drawing upon tradition, and a literary device that he would continue to adopt later in his writing career. Soon after, on the night of June 23–24, Komatsu, along with Ho Chi Minh, Phan Văn Trường, Nguyễn Thế Truyên, and Lê Văn Thuyét and other Vietnamese, were placed under close police surveillance with all believed to be conspiring in a plot to assassinate the emperor (ANOM HCI SPCE 364 Note de la Prefecture de Police de 20 Juin 1922. “Surveillance exercée à l’égard d’Annamites et Japonais suspecte”). The Paris association between Ho Chi Minh and Komatsu would be largely irrelevant except that, two decades later, Komatsu was in Hanoi during the August Revolution as the head or deputy head of Japanese intelligence and he would meet Ho Chi Minh again (see Gunn 2021a). Moreover, as the French suspected, he may well have been responsible for encouraging the defection of Japanese military and facilitating vital arms transfers to the Viet Minh (see Goscha 2002, 45; Marr 2013, 529; Gunn 2014b, 209).

Research, Writing and Publications

Alongside the frenzy of political activities and earning a living, Ho Chi Minh devoted an inordinate amount of time in Paris to researching and writing. In November 1921, on the reference of one of his early French mentors, Communist Deputy Paul Vaillant-Couturier, he gained a reader's ticket for the Bibliothèque Nationale (ANOM HCI SPCE 364 Devèze note). He also frequented such other libraries as St. Genevieve, the Bibliothèque populaire des Amis de l'Instruction (Paris XIII^e) and the anarchist Librairie sociale, while also borrowing books from municipal libraries (Ruscio 2019, 75). He read eclectically. French police records of his library borrowing card are indicative, showing readings ranged from French Enlightenment works and such classics of French literature as Hugo, Zola, Michelet, Anatole France and Rolland, along with a French translation of Tolstoy. His English language readings included Shakespeare and Dickens (Ruscio 2019, 76).

Ho Chi Minh subscribed to four dailies – *L'Humanité* (communist), *Le Libertaire* (anarchist), *Le Populaire* (socialist), *Le Journal du Peuple* – as well as numerous periodicals, weeklies and monthlies, not all of them political. Among other papers he read were the anarcho-syndicalist bi-weekly *La Vie Ouvrière*, *La revue communiste*, edited by Marxist émigré and PCF founder Charles Rappaport, and *La Vague* edited by the pacifist

turned PCF member Pierre Brizon. He also subscribed to the *Bulletin* of the League of Rights (ANOM HCI SPCE 364 Correspondence et notes). Notably *La Vague* (No. 2) carried articles by Bukharin, Sorel, Lenin, and Zinoviev, and with Edition No. 13 reproducing articles on Marx's Theory of Value, Engels on communist tactics and one by Lenin. In June 1921, Ho Chi Minh himself contributed an article to *La revue communiste* titled, "Le Mouvement Communiste International: Indochine."

Les Opprimés

The fruits of Ho Chi Minh's research and articles such as published in *L'Humanité*, *La Vie Ouvrière*, *Le Populaire* and in many other outlets brought him some notoriety just as they had immediate attraction in anti-colonial circles. Nevertheless, from practically the time he arrived in Paris and carrying through the time he gained a reader's card to the Bibliothèque Nationale, he devoted himself to the study of a political economy approach to colonial capitalism in France's empire, with particular reference to Indochina. What he had in mind was a book, tentatively titled *Les Opprimés* (The Oppressed), although it was not completed during his Paris sojourn. He continued to work on it in Moscow and eventually published *Le Procès de la Colonisation française* in 1926; by then he resided in China. Largely ignored, this was his *magnum opus* – no other single book-length political treatise appeared – and it merits attention for the literary, intellectual and political influences that went into its production, for its content, and to the extent that it was actually published as originally conceived.

Ho Chi Minh acknowledged that he was not a political theorist of the likes of Mao Zedong. Writing in "The Path which led me to Leninism," published in 1960, that he wrote on how he was influenced by reading a synopsis of Lenin's "Theses on the National and Colonial Questions" in *L'Humanité*. Hitherto, he explained, he only grasped the consequences of the Bolshevik revolution "intuitively" but, upon reading Lenin, the effect was electric (Fall 1967, 22–25). Yet it is unlikely that he read Lenin outside of newspaper or journal summaries while in Paris and even more unlikely that he read Marx. At the same time, unlike some of his compatriots, he was not a privileged scholarship student in France and received no stipend as did later arriving Chinese and even Thai students. In today's language he was an "undocumented worker." After years as a seaman, manual labourer or kitchen hand, he was undoubtedly out of touch with scholarly methods, newspapers, texts and sources, although he may have returned to serious study of language and literature during free time when not working during his years in London. Having been expelled from an elite school in his native Annam prior to graduation, and then pursuing a stint as a tutor in a traditional school, he was practically self-taught. He also faced periods of poverty, poor nourishment and illness leading to hospitalisation in Paris. Even in good times, some sections of his manuscript went missing, presumably stolen by the French agents. They shadowed his every move. He did have somewhat mentors among a number of French sympathisers but they were not necessarily scholars. Duiker (2000, 62), for example, claims without reference that Ho Chi Minh was advised by Jean Longuet to borrow library copies of *Das Kapital* which he apparently did (but which also served as a pillow). That may be a derisory comment, but still it is worth examining the extent to which Ho Chi Minh was touched by the Marxist lexicon during this period.

The Les Opprimés project revealed

Some rare insights into Ho Chi Minh's thought processes and project design come from a compatriot turned police informer. This was an Adjutant Lam, one of several stay-behind Vietnamese soldier-veterans whom he befriended. They filled him in on their World War I experiences and offered him an opportunity to sow propaganda among the military. Most likely part of an elite group of Vietnamese-French translators, Lam also had a knack for verbatim recording of conversations so his spy talents and intelligence certainly brought favour to his French paymasters. Even so, Ho Chi Minh did not reveal anything particularly compromising so Lam probably just pocketed the cash.

As recorded, on January 19, 1920, Lam arrived at the Gobelins address just as Ho Chi Minh was finishing a meeting with M. Long. The latter is not identified, but is undoubtedly Nguyễn Phan Long, a close associate of Bui Quang Chiểu, a founder in France of one of the earliest groupings of his compatriots and heading the reformist Saigon-based Constitutionalist Party. Upon Long's departure, Lam then proceeded to interrogate Ho Chi Minh (written as Quoc in the French police dossier).

Lam: Have you set up any more conferences or has the orator lost his fire?

Quoc: I am not missing anything. I was going to speak on Indochina but it would be ridiculous if only Indochinese dared to attend the conference such as happened [once before].

Lam: But you have been too violent in the way you have organised revolutionary Annamite [Vietnamese] groups. Who would dare to attend? What do you say?

Quoc: You reproach me for being violent, but if I had been soft for the past five years then no-one would ever have heard of the existence of Annam. We need the *pagailles* [commotions] and *aneries* [stupidities] so that we will be noticed. If they ask me where are the revolutionaries, then I say that there are 20 million over there, every day active in their demands only they are silenced. Finally, what do they want to do with me? Imprison me? Deport me? Cut off my head? Anything could happen.

Lam: If you want to push your luck that far, carry on, bravo!

Still undeterred by this style of conversation, at 8 p.m. Ho Chi Minh accepted Lam's invitation to visit a theatre on Boulevard de Clichy. Before curtain-fall and during intermissions, Lam recalled their conversation:

Lam: Have you been doing anything worthwhile these days?

Quoc: I am always researching my book.

Lam: When will you finish?

Quoc: I can't answer exactly because I still need many documents. I cannot say that this book is written by me because to give it authenticity I use extracts from works written by French colonialists. The plan of my book is like this:

Chapter 1: The situation in Indochina before the French occupation.

Chapter 2: What the French did in Indochina.

Chapter 3: The situation today.

Chapter 4: Looking to the future.

Lam: How are you going to print this book. You know that publishers demand *la galette* [finance].

Quoc: What I am going to do is simple. When I have finished the book and it's ready for printing I will present it to the socialists or whoever and sell it to them just like a domestic shines shoes or arranges a table.

Lam: Marvellous.

Undeterred and apparently totally trusting, on January 21, 1920, Ho Chi Minh accepted Lam's invitation to join him in attending a theatre performance on rue Montmartre. As Lam reported to his French paymasters, the conversation touched the following points:

Lam: When will you finish your book?

Quoc: In two or more months.

Lam: I heard that there are several underground groups in Japan and China who help émigrés. I find it odd that you don't ask them for help and you have produced something better than those who went to China or Japan.

Quoc: Do I need help from any group? I have my principles. Look out for yourself . . .

Lam: This is the most difficult of all. And we would need the time . . . and I ask what happens after two or three months?

Quoc: Oh. And the title of the book. That will be *Les Opprimés*.

Lam: Always the violence, where does it lead to, better put [the title] like, "The past and present in Annam" which at least has an historic air. *Les Opprimés* sounds like a novel . . .

Quoc: No. I will keep the title *Les Opprimés*.

Lam: Let us admit that such a title will attract the attention of socialists, but do you have the permission of your publishers to use extracts of your works such as you will include in your book? Take care, these publishers will go after you.

Quoc: What have I got that they will go after? I will go to the courts to claim my rights. This would be a happy occasion to make demands and propaganda in front to the courts and the public.

Lam: Everything will turn out all right for you, *quel phenomenon!* (ANOM SLOTFOM XVI Notes d'agents, rapports de surveillance).

French agents who regularly monitored the libraries he frequented as to his reading habits came up with the following list of books that he consulted in preparation of *Les Opprimés*:

L'Indochine en péril (J. Ajalbert); *Les destinées de l'Indochine* (Ajalbert); *Les colonies françaises* (P. Gafferrel); *Etude sur le Régime Financier de l'Empire d'Annam* (P. Vitry); *Indochine agricole* (Perret); *Tonkin françaises* (Courtois); *Indochine françaises* (Russier); *Lettres de Tonkin* (Normand); *Erreurs et dangers* (Bernard); *Sauterelles* (Fabre); *La France en Tonkin* (T. du M.); *Affaire de 1908* (Phan); *Discourse de Presence; Politique indochinoise*

(Pouvourville); *Tonkin actual* (Pouvourville); *Conquête du Tonkin* (Gros); *Mensonge et Vautour* (Gros) (ANOM SLOTFOM XVI Notes d'agents, rapports de surveillance; and see Ruscio 2019, 76–78).

Given that most of these then standard works on Indochina were published in the late nineteenth century – with Phan Châu Trinh's *Affaire de 1908* an obvious exception – Ho Chi Minh was correct in identifying the need to research and publish a critical political economy on Indochina fitting the early decades of the twentieth century at a time when pacification had moved to *mis en valeur* (which can be interpreted as, variously, development and exploitation). He was also correct in his assumption that, unless someone like himself took on the project, then it was unlikely to emerge from the pen of French authors, the French Left included. In fact, it was not until the late 1930s that French agronomists such as Charles Robequian, Yves Henri, and Pierre Gourou began to produce field-based studies, with Vo Nguyen Giap an earlier collaborator in Gourou's project (see Gunn 2014b, 5–6). It was not until the 1980s that Western scholars re-examined Vietnam's colonial political economy through a Marxist lens (see Murray 1980).

In March 1920 Agent Jean reported that Ho Chi Minh had finished his book and that he intended to visit either Marcel Cachin, the editor of *L'Humanité*, or Jean Longuet, editor of *Le Populaire*, to solicit a preface. Reportedly, he intended to print the book at his own expense of about 500 francs, although that is highly unlikely. He had contacted a compatriot to design a cover image which displayed a map of Indochina dripping blood. Reportedly, he was then translating Montesquieu's *De L'Esprit des Lois* (The Spirit of Laws) into *quốc ngữ* or romanised Vietnamese. Subsequently, Agent Jean reported that Longuet was “too busy” to write the preface. Neither did the president of “Féminisme” (a militant French feminist group) respond. Meantime, Ho Chi Minh requested *L'Humanité* to print the book (ANOM SLOTFOM XVI Note de Jean du 9 au 16 Mars 1920). Time passed with no result.

On June 8, 1921, Ho Chi Minh sought to publish his book with la Société Mutuelle d'Éditions, 14 rue de Lannery, a press noted for its left-wing or anarchist publications. The rejection note revealed that he had changed the title to *Indochine ou le Sang de Tchaque* (ANOM SLOTFOM XVI 1920). With Tchaque a play on *nhà quê* meaning common person or peasant, obviously this was an obscure title for a French audience. Nevertheless, by placing the emphasis upon the peasantry the title was also novel. Still, it had Indochina in the title and that is important in the way that he looked out from his native “Annam” to the total ensemble that made up Indochine française. It is likely that the manuscript was handwritten, although occasionally he may have borrowed a typewriter for some of his journalism. On September 4, he went to *L'Humanité*, to request Cachin to take on publication. On September 13, as the police reported, contrary to his hopes, Cachin rejected it, claiming that it was too expensive, sales too difficult and of little appeal to a European audience (ANOM SLOTFOM XVI, Rapport de Devèze, September 13, 1920).

As Ruscio (2019, 78) summarises it, in producing this text in just 11 months after his arrival in France, it demonstrated “his great capacity for work, his real mastery of French language.” This is correct and, for an individual who had witnessed the excesses of colonialism across more than one continent, it also reveals his passion for study and knowledge to better inform a reading public in France. Meanwhile, he had also attended

the Tours Congress becoming a founding member of the PCF and was particularly active in its branch meetings in and around Paris. With his new credentials and activism in left-wing anti-colonial communist circles, he was ready to expand his network out from his hitherto narrow “constituency” of fellow Vietnamese and other Asians to embrace a spectrum of nationalities. While the move obviously hailed Ho Chi Minh’s newfound proletarian internationalism, nevertheless, it also opened a breach with his senior compatriots – Phan Châu Trinh in particular – who had urged moderation or at least a strategy of non-violent subversion even in the knowledge that France would not yield to declarations of independence. The moment in Paris when Ho Chi Minh appeared to yield to reformist temptation, entering into dialogue with French officials was thus short-lived.

The Intercolonial Union: Bringing in the Africans, West Indians and Arabs

Dubbed the Union Intercoloniale des Originaires de toutes des Colonies, the Intercolonial Union was founded in October 1921, with a newspaper launched in April the following year. Answering the demands of the many French colonial subjects then residing in the French capital, Ho Chi Minh included, though not formally communist, the Union nevertheless received a PCF subsidy. According to article 2 of its foundation statutes, its aim was “to group together and guide the colonials resident in France . . . with a view to solidarity; and to discuss and study the political economy of all the colonies” (ANOM HCI SPCE 364 Correspondence et notes 1921). As Goebel (2015, 283) summarises, the Union claimed to speak for the rights of Malagasy soldiers, national independence for Vietnam and abolition of the “native code,” a key demand of the Algerians.

According to Birchall (2011), with Ho Chi Minh a co-founder, the Union was actually an initiative of Guadeloupean lawyer Max Clainville Bloncourt. In turn, Bloncourt had contributed to the foundation of a Comité d’études coloniales (Committee of Colonial Studies) coming under the newly formed PCF with its premises at 120 rue Lafayette. French police agents who penetrated the Union’s ranks reported that other members of the executive committee included Lucien Barquisseau (a lawyer from Réunion), Jean-Baptiste (businessman, Guadeloupe), Morinde, (businessman, Antilles), Honorien (Guiana), with Gaston Monnerville serving as general secretary (ANOM HCI SPCE 364 Correspondence et notes 1921). A Toulouse-educated native of French Guiana and member of the French Radical Party, Monnerville was an elected deputy from Guiana in 1932, going on to play a prominent role in French politics in the post-war period.

Informers claimed a meeting held on October 10, 1922 included the Madagascan, Ralaimongo, who was reported as endorsing the communist direction of the Union (ANOM HCI SPCE 364 Pierre Guesde, October 17, 1922). Yet, this is doubtful. Both Ralaimongo and his compatriot Samuel Stéfany would later deny such an association (Domenichini 1969, 252). Ralaimongo who had enlisted along with 40,000 of his compatriots for wartime service in support of France during World War I, remained in France, married locally, but failed in his petition to be granted citizenship. Returning to Madagascar in July–December 1921, he was charged with sedition for his integrationist propaganda. Reversing course, he returned to France in early 1921 where he plunged

himself into journalism. It was at this juncture that he became attracted to the Union (Domenichini 1969, 245).² The Union was to maintain this multi-ethnic membership and attracted even more Vietnamese, along with North Africans.

Le Paria (The Pariah)

Launched by the Intercolonial Union in April 1922, *Le Paria* (*Organe des Peuple Opprimé des Colonies*) set up at Rue du Marché des Patriarches (also becoming Ho Chi Minh's final residential address in Paris). As Goebel (2005, 283) explains, reporting on Marcus Garvey's pan-Africanism, as well as Indian and Egyptian nationalism, *Le Paria*'s information drew upon not only the Parisian and international press but also personal contacts among the Africans, Arabs and Asians in Paris. The first edition of April 1, 1922 had a print run of 1,000. With the May 1922 second edition, Ho Chi Minh assumed the editorship. Meanwhile, Nguyễn Thế Truyền wrote many articles for *Le Paria* and was in charge of the double issue No. 18–19 (Ruscio 2019, 73). Burchall (2011) explains that between 1922 and 1926, 26 editions of *Le Paria* would appear, each printed on a single news sheet, with Ho Chi Minh described as the “mainspring” of the editorial team.

Major themes running through *Le Paria* were “repression” and “rights,” colonial economic oppression and the winning of political liberties (albeit, not necessarily independence). As mostly remembered today, it also carried a small number of Ho Chi Minh's didactic cartoons mocking colonialism. While space precludes a systematic content analysis of Ho Chi Minh's published articles here, Crowe (2020, Ch. 7) has contrasted *Le Paria* with *L'Humanité*. As he discerns, whereas Ho Chi Minh's articles in *L'Humanité* “pleaded” with his readers in the language of human rights based upon Enlightenment thinking, in *Le Paria* “crudely written” articles were “anti-West” (Crowe 2020, 176). In *Le Paria*, he exposed French brutality and atrocities, contrasting these sharply with French delusions of a civilising mission. Drawing upon research by Duiker (2000) and Quinn-Judge (2002), Crowe points to articles touching upon the brutal beating to death of a woman who had the temerity to ask for her wages, the beating of two North African men for stealing grapes, and an M. Beck who broke his driver's skull with a blow from his fist, and so on. Other articles on colonial economics, Crow (2020, 183) asserts, “are not distinct from one another to bear summarizing.” If the audience for *L'Humanité* was French, that for *Le Paria* was in the colonies albeit read under threat of penal sanction and with the authorities seeking to buy out the entire stock. Obviously, as Crowe (2020, 177) underscores, the turn to a “little paper” like *Le Paria* represented an “emotional hardening” on the part of Ho Chi Minh, signalled by articles appearing in *Le Paria* in 1924–1925, signed off by Nguyen O Phap (Nguyen who hates the French).

The French police reports are tedious on the Union and events touching *Le Paria*, but several are indicative. For example, on September 29, 1922, at a meeting of the *Le Paria* editorial staff, Ralaimongo read aloud a letter that he and all his demobilised Madagascan compatriots in France had received from the Ministry of Colonies. This he interpreted as “an act of intimidation against the Malagaches.” As endorsed by Stéfany, a rebuttal was to be published in the November issue of *Le Paria*.

Some 30 individuals attended the monthly Union meeting on October 22, 1922, presided over by Ralaimongo, Bloncourt and Monnerville. By this stage the Union had 103 members. Ho Chi Minh and Ralaimongo submitted articles to be edited by Bloncourt

for publication. At the November 5 meeting, Ho Chi Minh was nominated acting secretary along with “Williams” and with Nguyễn Văn Ai as treasurer. The November 14 meeting heard Bloncourt and Ho Chi Minh propose a conference session on Madagascar and Réunion for December 23 to be provided by lawyer Barquisseau. At a November 22 meeting, Ralaimongo explained how he had gained a special reprieve from Albert Sarraut, the Minister of Colonies, including a free passage to Tananarive. Just as Ralaimongo departed, at the next meeting on December 1, 1922, one Hadj-Ali (Hadjali) made an appearance. This is a reference to the Algeria-born, Hadj-Ali Abelkader, who, like Ho Chi Minh, was a foundation member of the PCF. As Birchall (2019) points out, by 1924 there were 75,000 North African workers in the Paris region with between 100,000 and 150,000 in France. These workers were mostly employed in dangerous jobs in mines, steelworks, and chemical factories. On May 5, 1923, the core group met in the PCF headquarters for a session of Le Comité des études coloniales. In June 1923, Agent Désiré classified the former apolitical Association d’Education France-Chinoise as “socialiste révolutionnaire” and linked with the Intercolonial Union (ANOM SLOTFOM 58 VIII 4 Note de Agent Désiré, June 1, 1923). If this was the case, then it suggests that the Union’s outreach to the Chinese student-workers was starting to make inroads.

However, Ho Chi Minh’s sudden disappearance from Paris in July 1923, without informing his compatriots or even the Intercolonial Union, caused great consternation among members. Likewise, French police were perplexed about his journey from France to Germany and on to Russia where he arrived in June 1923. Ho Chi Minh came to believe that the Union was compromised. For one, Quinn-Judge (2001, 42) believes its treasurer Nguyễn Văn Ai was reporting as French Agent de Villier. As Agent Désiré reported on July 20, 1923, Nguyễn Thế Truyền, Nguyen Van Ai, Monneville, Hadjali and Bloncourt met together in the absence of Nguyễn Ái Quốc and decided to press ahead with the publication of the next issues of *Le Paria*. None had any news of Ho Chi Minh’s 12-day absence (ANOM SLOTFOM 58 VIII 4 Note de Agent Désiré, July 20, 1923).

On October 3, 1923, *Le Paria* editorial staff and “militants” of the Intercolonial Union met, including Bloncourt. Facing a dire financing problem, they were informed that *Le Paria* had attracted 300 subscriptions. A January 23, 1924 note revealed that two issues of *Le Paria* of December 1923–January 1924 were combined owing to a reduction in the FCP subsidy, in line with the Party’s switch of focus upon an upcoming electoral campaign. But also, the absence of Nguyễn Ái Quốc and the absence from Paris of Phan Văn Trường had weakened the editorial direction (ANOM HCI SPCE 365). The latter had departed Paris by train for Marseille on December 6, 1923, before returning permanently to his homeland, launching his career in journalism and anti-colonial advocacy. Earlier, in August, Monneville departed for London. By then, the Intercolonial Union was clearly in decline, but it also had a second wind.

In January 1924, Nguyễn Thế Truyền and the militant ex-soldier Trần Xuân Hồ had taken on editorial responsibility for *Le Paria*, ahead of Bloncourt. As French Agent de la Brosse claimed, rivalries between the “blacks” and “yellows” had emerged in the Union, with the latter comprising a minority. Meanwhile, French authorities reported that numerous subscriptions to *Le Paria* were solicited from across a range of the French colonies, Indochina included, giving an importance to the publication which it had hitherto not achieved. The communist tendency of *Le Paria* was increasingly dominant

and the journal was appearing on a more regular basis but with more attention given to France's African colonies (ANOM HCI SPCE 365 de Brosse, January 9; March 19, 1924). Likely this emphasis reflected Hadj-Ali's influence.

Attempts to bring other Asians into the Union only started to make progress in 1925, by which time Ho Chi Minh was in Guangzhou. At a Union meeting of April 15, it was decided to join with the Kuomintang in France in hosting a conference held at 94 Bld. August Blanqui. Some 600 people attended including Ly Tsing Sich (from Korea); Yen Tchao Dehoine (China), Nguyễn Thế Truyền, Lamina Senghor, the Senegal-born founder of the Ligue de la Défense de la Race Nègre (League for the Defence of Black People) and Vaillant-Couturier. The meeting ended with the singing of the Internationale (ANOM SLOTFOM 24 III 4 1925, Agent Desiré).

A December 3, 1925 Union meeting brought together 20 Vietnamese including members of the Bui Quang Chiêu's Constitutionalist Party, with Nguyễn Thế Truyền presiding. Signalling that he had received a letter from Ho Chi Minh, he read an extract calling upon them to support the French proletariat to work for Vietnamese independence. A collection was made in support of sending a telegram to Indochina Governor General Alexandre Varenne to protest the rendition from Shanghai to French Indochina of Phan Bội Châu and the death sentence imposed upon him. The death of Emperor Khải Định was reported but not with remorse (ANOM HCI SPCE 365 Sûreté indochinoise, missions d'agents: rapports. Compte Rendu, December 17, 1925). In 1926, Nguyễn Thế Truyền broke away from *Le Paria* and the PCF by launching his own nationalist broadsheet *Việt Nam Hôn*, also going by the French name, *L'âme Annamite*.

Le Procès de la colonisation française: An evaluation

Once in Guangzhou from November 1924, Ho Chi Minh launched his own publication, *Thanh Niên* (Youth), while also seeking to recruit a core Vietnamese communist group outside of anarchist influences (see Gunn 2021b, 105–107). As Ruscio (2019, 80) explains, Ho Chi Minh's original manuscript of *Les Opprimés* does not show up in French archives. So what happened to it? He advances two hypotheses. First, that Ho Chi Minh took it along with him to Moscow, thus preserving the original. Second, that he modified the original conception of the book, making it acceptable to the future Parisian publisher, Librairie du travail: Petite bibliothèque coloniale, then linked with the PCF.

Published as *Le Procès de la colonisation française*, it had a print-run of 2,000 copies. As advertised in *L'Humanité* (February 1926) the book – then still forthcoming – would be on sale at the newspaper's bookstore for five francs. Bringing together articles first published in *L'Humanité* and in the Comintern publication, *Imprecor*, in 1925–1926, the work had 12 chapters, with a preface written by Nguyễn Thế Truyền. Chapter or section heads, rendered into English, were: Blood Tax; Poisoning of the Natives; The Governors; The Administrators; The Civilizers, Administrative Corruption; Exploitation of the Natives; Justice; Obscurantism; Clericalism; The Martyrdom of Native Women; Awakening of Slaves, with examples from Indochina, Dahomey, Syria and colonies; and the Manifesto of the Intercolonial Union. The book also adds pages on the international peasant conference which Ho Chi Minh attended in Moscow, as well as “Trade

Union Organization in the Colonies,” extracted from an anonymous official report of June 27, 1923, and an appendix entitled, “Dear Vietnamese Youth.” A small volume of 123 pages, it carried a notice announcing the two further volumes in a series; they were never produced.

Bernard Fall, the author of a significant digest of Ho Chi Minh’s writings, reprinted the work from the English language version that first appeared in the *Selected Works of Ho Chi Minh* (1960). Published under the English title, *French Colonialism on Trial*, Fall describes it as his “most important work,” an evaluation we return to below. He also labels it, “in reality a series of highly emotional pamphlets” (Fall 1967, vi), another assessment that should be examined, including how and why the particular mix of texts and articles generated this impression.³ Over the years, various reprints have been made with the first French edition appearing in Vietnam in 1946, with the first Vietnamese language edition appearing in 1960.

Le Procès de la colonisation française (hereafter, *Procès*) opens with a lament as to the 80,000 Vietnamese dead in World War I (although that figure is later revised downwards, as discussed below). It mocks the French *mission civilisatrice* in general and lampoons its governors and administrators and exposes colonial brutalities, racism and exploitation. The tone is anecdotal drawing from many colonial settings and experiences, including his own. The text hardly resembles the outline for *Les Opprimés* mentioned above. It is hard to see in this text the masses of statistical compilations which he drew up during his research in 1920 and some of it published in *L’Humanité*. Rather, the style is reminiscent of *Le Paria* – anecdotal accounts of the brutalities and rapes committed by French soldiers in Vietnam, Algeria and elsewhere. The appendix on the Union is a reminder of the context and style of anti-colonial networking that he achieved in 1922–1923 rather than the younger political economist interviewed by the enigmatic adjutant spy. Where initially he promised a political economy, the published book is a shocking and compelling narrative on colonial brutalities. But who was the audience for this work unless it was metropolitan French of left-wing persuasion? More the pity he did not produce a romanised Vietnamese version for his compatriots who did not read French, as evidently advised by Nguyễn Thế Truyền (and that would be the way he proceeded in later life as with the production of *Thanh Niên* targeting a mass readership).

Another question is to what degree did Ho Chi Minh collaborate on the production of *Procès*? Obviously, he wished to see his work in print and he continued researching and writing in Moscow, also managing to publish some articles in *Impecor*. For a time, he corresponded with one or other of his compatriots back in Paris, likely including Nguyễn Thế Truyền. But the move from Moscow to Guangzhou seemed to end this. Even though Nguyễn Thế Truyền received at least one communication from Ho Chi Minh in Guangzhou, they cannot have exchanged letters. This we know from letters sent to his handlers in Moscow, as with one of July 1926 requesting: “I wish to be put in communication with Nguyễn Thế Truyền” via the intermediary of the Comité d’études coloniales, also informing Moscow of the latter’s association with *Le Paria* and *L’âme Annamite* (RGASPI. Ф. 495. Оп. 154. Д. 594). In other words, out of letter contact with France for almost two years, Ho Chi Minh cannot even have known that *Procès* had been printed.

The Moscow Manuscript

A version of the Paris manuscript has survived in Comintern archives, lodged some time prior to Ho Chi Minh's departure for China. Typewritten with handwritten corrections or edits, it runs to 88 pages and so is a longer text than *Procès*, especially if we subtract the appendices from the latter. As a compilation of Ho Chi Minh's writings, it also comprises more sections. As with the essays reproduced in *Procès*, those of the Moscow manuscript do not appear in his *Selected Works* (Ho Chi Minh 1960) or *Hồ Chí Minh Toàn tập, tập 1 (Complete Works)* (Ho Chi Minh 2011). There is no reason to believe that the Moscow manuscript has been edited by anyone other than Ho Chi Minh, although the page numbers appear to have been imposed for filing purposes and possibly also the title "Indochina," as it appears in the archive catalogue but not on the text. None of the sections are dated and neither are they sequenced chronologically or in any thematic order, with one section duplicated. Unsigned, but filed under the name Nguyễn Ái Quốc, there is no doubt as to its authorship and this is matched by internal evidence as with the admission that he was among the group of Vietnamese who petitioned the French parliament and the Paris Peace Conference (RGASPI. Ф. 495. Оп. 154. Д. 595).

Rather than dividing into chapters as with *Procès* or even, as envisaged, in his *Les Opprimés* project, the Moscow manuscript comprises 21 sections.⁴ Some of these sections duplicate the chapter titles of *Procès* as with Church/Clericalism; Justice; Obscurantism and Administrators, but significant sections titled History; Geography; Press; and Resistance do not appear in *Procès*. As with *Procès*, the method might be described as descriptive-analytical or informational-interpretive. Yet, the articles are not imbued with Marxist-Leninist categories or even the language of class with the single exception of inclusion of the text of *Revendications*. Significantly, the last eight lines of the original text, which calls upon the "goodwill" of the "noble" French people in the interests of humanitarianism to reconsider their colonial attitudes and methods, are replaced with the text asserting that, in the light of Wilson's misleading call for the self-determination of nations, "*L'affranchissements des peuples ne peut obtenir qu'avec l'émancipation du prolétariat; et que l'un et l'autre serait l'oeuvre du communisme et de la révolution mondiale*" (The emancipation of the peoples can only be obtained with the emancipation of the proletariat; both served by communism and the world revolution) (RGASPI. Ф. 495. Оп. 154. Д. 595). From this we might conclude that the re-edited version of *Revendications* marks a transition in Ho Chi Minh's thought from the Enlightenment spirit of the Group of Annam Patriots back in 1919, to proletariat internationalism which he began to articulate upon arrival in Moscow or perhaps prior to leaving Paris.

As with *Procès*, the Moscow manuscript leads with a retrospective on France's then recent past as with the recruitment of tens of thousands of Vietnamese sent to World War I fronts, with Salonika and Siberia mentioned. Whereas in *Procès* he cites 80,000 Vietnamese casualties, in the Moscow version the figure is revised to 20,000 deaths. Titled "Les Méfaits du Militarism" (The Downside of Militarism), it is a more focused text than the meandering opening section of *Procès*. This is followed by "Les atrocités de la civilisation" (Crimes Against Civilisation), written in the style of *Le Paria*, with its vignettes on massacres by French soldiers, violations of the dead and more. "Mentalité Coloniale" (The Colonial Mentality) continues on French racism. Another section,

titled “La Résistance” (The Resistance), traces the history of anti-colonial revolts back to 1862. Undoubtedly, if published, Ho Chi Minh’s synoptic history section would provoke comment. For example, he compares Angkor in the ninth century to Rome and Greece. Specific to Vietnam, he applauds the actions of his forebears in driving back the Mongol invaders with bamboo spears, which would resonate with Vietnamese nationalism down unto today. The French invasion of Đà Nẵng in 1858, leading into the occupation of Indochina, is said to have reduced its peoples to “slavery.” On geography, as in the history section, he also references Indochina at large and not just the three “*ky*” or divisions of Vietnam. The Moscow version carries more extensive economic analysis than *Procès* as with a section on the economy, namely “Sa Vie Economique” (Economic Life), replete with tables of statistics as does another section, “Le consortium des bandits,” on French alcohol, opium and salt monopolies, and the nuanced and convincing indictment of colonial taxes and corvées in “Les Impôts” (Taxes). Mostly, the French sources have disappeared in this section, along with Jean Ajalbert’s contention that Vietnamese consumed more opium prior to the arrival of the French, which is crossed out in the Moscow manuscript. The single major quotation, appearing in “Le consortium des bandits,” is that of a circular issued by Albert Sarraut, at the time Indochina governor general, and sent to administrators on monopolies. Another section, “L’Annam vue par les Français” (Vietnam as seen by the French), offers a comparative perspective on colonialism with reference to statistics on, for example, the size and population of European colonies. In so doing, Ho Chi Minh makes oblique reference to trenchant critic of European colonialism in Africa and his close contact in Paris, Paul Vigne d’Octon, as well as the writers Albert de Pouvourville and Jean Marquet (both with first-hand knowledge of Vietnam), described by Brocheux and Hémery (2009, 248) as having “demonstrated a true consciousness of the colonial situation, of its contradictions and injustices.” But this is all that remains of the original French sources consulted in Paris and they are not directly quoted (see RGASPI Ф. 495. Оп. 154. Д. 595). Notably, the status and treatment of women is missing from the manuscript while having been included in *Procès*. However, this subject is in a separate Comintern file under the title, “La Civilization Capitaliste et La femme des colonies” (Capitalist Civilization and Women in the Colonies), appearing as a handwritten document (RGASPI Ф. 495. Оп. 154. Д. 596). As with *Procès*, the intended audience of the compilation was the French-speaking world at large, so Ho Chi Minh does not overlay traditional or allegorical themes, the hallmark of writings while in Guangzhou with Vietnamese as the audience.

Conclusion

This article has revealed how the years between 1919 and 1923, coinciding with Ho Chi Minh presenting copies of *Revendications* to the Peace Conference at Versailles and his move to Moscow, were transformative in the evolution of his political thought. While space has precluded a deeper discussion of Ho Chi Minh’s intellectual engagement with French socialists and communists, this article has had two concerns, first, in tracking the progression of his theory development as matched by his library research and literary production and, second, highlighting his praxis or committed action in building networks with like-minded anti-colonials. Undoubtedly Ho Chi Minh’s primary networks

were his compatriots from the Gobelins group. But, as was shown, his networks included stay-behind soldiers like Adjutant Lam or militant seamen like Lê Văn Thuyết, the latter today honoured in his hometown, Hải Phòng, by a street name. But this article has gone further in identifying his networks involving other Asians, Koreans especially, but including Chinese and other colonials or semi-colonials, as in the Intercolonial Union and *Le Paria* group. After all, if Ho Chi Minh grasped anything from Marx at this stage of his life it was the latter's injunction, "The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it" (Marx 1972).

Ruscio's question on whether *Le Procès de la colonisation française* is the missing *Les Opprimés* version that Ho Chi Minh hand-carried to Moscow is not answered with a simple yes or no. The concern for political economy is certainly present in *Procès* but it is also marginal in the broader mix of chapters that include history, geography and analytical pieces on press censorship and restricted education. Moreover, the sources that informed *Les Opprimés* have mostly disappeared. In other words, the journalism of his previously published pieces appears stronger in *Procès*. The chapter outline and book design as he revealed to the Vietnamese adjutant spy is nowhere to be found. Even if there was no reason to speak too much of the truth to this person, still he set forth a convincing architecture for the book he was planning.

A second concern of this article has been to evaluate whether or not the Moscow manuscript is faithful to *Procès*. The Moscow manuscript is fuller and richer than *Procès* and more in tune with the political economy design that apparently informed the *Les Opprimés* manuscript. Nevertheless, in the absence of quotations and citations it may not even reflect the original documentation, including Ho Chi Minh's significant library research into political economy. This suggests that while Ho Chi Minh evidently brought along with him to Moscow certain of his published and unpublished writings he must have left the full *Les Opprimés* manuscript behind in Paris. In Moscow he would have been hard put to reconstruct the original text, lacking specialist French resources. His fall-back then was published articles and journalism such as were accessible through copies of *L'Humanité* and, as he continued to write, *Imprecor*, and with the more recent experience of *Le Paria* and the Union Intercoloniale behind him. In any case, in the near absence of Marxist-Leninist categories, the Moscow manuscript, with its eclectic mix of carefully researched analytical pieces drawing upon book knowledge and memory, rightly belongs to his Paris period.

Still, the question might be raised as to why significant sections of the Moscow manuscript as with history, geography and resistance, did not carry through to *Procès*? Did the editing come from Moscow or France? Did Ho Chi Minh have a say in its production or even the title? Indeed, did Nguyễn Thế Truyền, who wrote the preface, influence the selection and editing of chapters? Why didn't the sequel editions emerge as advertised? Did this have anything to do with Nguyễn Thế Truyền abandoning *Le Paria* in 1925 and striking out with his own political party and paper? Aside from the appendix on international trade unions there is not much appearing in *Procès* that could have been written in Moscow. In fact, as with the writings of Indonesian or Latin American communists then in Berlin or Moscow, the Comintern encouraged political economy analysis of the colonies especially as they were virtually unknown to international audiences (see Gunn 2022). So, in this reasoning, what motivated the French editors to produce a trimmed down volume of miscellaneous texts? Was it publishing economy, as

with the excuse offered to Ho Chi Minh by *L'Humanité* in 1923? Or was it PCF coyness on the colonial question when it touched core heartfelt French *mission civilisatrice* interests and perhaps a future vision of a Francophone condominium spanning the continents? Or, in 1926, did the PCF still believe that the work lacked an audience in France?

Ho Chi Minh was not idle in Moscow. Aside from penning articles for *Imprecor* and other publications, he evidently worked on the Moscow manuscript. Now with free access to a typewriter he could produce a full typewritten version from handwritten drafts. One matter is certain, at this stage of his life, the audience for his writings was increasingly Comintern officials and, true to their Bolshevik convictions, they wanted concrete analysis of class and peasant conditions linked with party organisation and propaganda. From Guangzhou and later in Hong Kong, Ho Chi Minh would deliver page after page on peasant conditions in Annam, along with a report on the same topic for China, most of it remaining in Comintern archives and never published (see Quinn-Judge 2002; Borton 2009). It seems that the Moscow manuscript probably remained in Moscow. The Comintern was not a publishing outfit (although an exception was made for the Indonesian communist, Tan Malaka). The manuscript was never delivered to France. Likely, Ho Chi Minh erred by not bringing it with him to Guangzhou in which case he could have continued to work on it and take control. In fact he lost control. The most likely scenario is that when he departed the Rue du Marché des Patriarches address, doubling as the headquarters of *Le Paria* and the Intercolonial Union, his records passed into the hands of Nguyễn Thế Truyên, literally his literary executor and an individual long entrusted to edit his articles.

It seems clear that, as a work of political economy, *Procès* is Ho Chi Minh's major published book, even if the selection and editing was done by Nguyễn Thế Truyên. No other body of his writing comes close to matching *Procès* if we peruse the pages of Fall's *Selected Writings* or that of official versions. That is not to say that Ho Chi Minh abandoned writing or was less creative, it is just that the genre of his writings would change according to circumstances, as with the allegorical articles produced for *Thanh Niên* published in Guangzhou and his prison writings in Hong Kong from 1930–1933, entrusted to his British lawyer but lost during the Japanese invasion. He later wrote allegorical poetry written in Nationalist Chinese prisons between 1942 and 1943, alongside propaganda pieces in the run-up to the August Revolution of 1945. Important parts of *Procès* contributing to a political economy understanding of Indochina remaining in the Moscow archives were passed over and still remain unpublished. Had they been included in *Procès*, and had the book been better edited, then it could have been evaluated under the rubric of political economy and not dismissed as a series of emotional pamphlets. In other words, the Moscow manuscript along with some other unpublished pieces suggest that the promise of sequels to *Procès* awaits a good editor and publisher.

Even so, does *Procès* take its place in the Marxist lexicon? Hardly, because it does not employ Marxist categories. Simply put, Ho Chi Minh had not read Marx closely during his early Paris period, although he would subsequently read summaries in some of the journals to which he subscribed. Neither did he have close mentors in political theory – as opposed to praxis – such as revealed by his networking activities in France carried through into later life. Still there are intimations that he had drunk deep from Lenin's

understandings of imperialism, as with the role of financial capital, colonial monopolies, and so on; that comes through in his economic writings. By 1920, the first translations of Marx into Japanese, Chinese and Indonesian had already appeared. Vietnamese versions would lag by decades. To the extent that Ho Chi Minh was exposed to a Marxist methodology and to Leninist readings then it would be in later years through rigorous training at the University of the Toilers; with his exit from France, his Paris-style library research was over, just as his sources were increasingly oral or derived from underground reports and his intense local knowledge and nationalist instincts.

Notes

1. A graduate of Japan's Meiji University, today Jo (Cho Soang) is hailed in Korea as the author of the Korean Independence Declaration issued at Jilin province in China by 39 ethnic Korean leaders, and with the declaration serving as "a catalyst to boost the Korean pro-independence movement against Japanese colonial rule" (Anonymous 2019).
2. Returning again to Madagascar, Ralaimongo recommenced his political career still fighting for democracy and French naturalisation. His statue remains in Tananarive saluting him as father of Madagascar independence. Lawyer Stéfany had become active in the League of Rights, having formed a Madagascar section (Domenichini 1969, 245).
3. The version reprinted by Fall edits out some parts as with the preface by Nguyễn Thế Truỳền and a section on governors, among other details (and this bears examination). In 2007, *Le Temps des Cerises* published a new edition with a preface by Alain Ruscio.
4. In the order in which they are numbered, the section titles in French read: Les méfaits du militarism (The misdeeds of militarism); Les atrocités de la civilization (The atrocities of civilization); Sa géographie (Its geography); Les classes (Classes); L'histoire (History); Sa vie économique (Economic life); Mentalité colonial (Colonial Mentality); Les administrateurs (Administrators); Parasitisme et pétaudière (Parasitism and state of disorder); Le consortium des bandits (The bandit consortium); Concessions et concessionnaires (Concessions and concessionaires); Les travaux publics (Public works); Corvées ou travaux forces (Corvees or forced labour); L'obscurantisme (Obscurantism); La presse (The press); Les impôts (Taxation); La resistance (Resistance); Revendications du Peuple Annamite (Demands of the Vietnamese people); L'Eglise (Church); La Justice (Justice); L'Annam vu par les français (Vietnam as seen by the French).

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