

Ho Chi Minh Sites in Thailand: Their Significance and Potential Problems for Thai-Vietnamese Relations

แหล่งที่ตั้งเชิงประวัติศาสตร์ของ
อดีตประธานาธิบดีโฮจิมินห์ ในประเทศไทย :
สาระสำคัญ และปมปัญหาที่เป็นไปได้
ในฐานะของความสัมพันธ์ไทย-เวียดนาม

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Every nation had its heroes. Methods of combat may differ, as do the historical eras in which the conflicts in which they distinguished themselves took place. But one thing that is always the same is the exalted status of a hero who fights for the country he loves. Ho Chi Minh is one of the greatest of Vietnam's national heroes, but Thailand, too, played an important part in his achievement. (Bangkok Post June 23, 2003)

บทคัดย่อ

เวียดนามและไทยมีความสัมพันธ์อันยาวนานหลายด้านทางประวัติศาสตร์ซึ่งหมายถึงปฏิสัมพันธ์ระหว่างรัฐต่อรัฐ และประชาชนต่อประชาชน ประวัติศาสตร์สมัยใหม่เป็นเสมือนพยานรู้เห็นถึงความรุ่งเรืองและถดถอย ความอบอุ่น



ภาพ : ที่ซึ่งประธานาธิบดี โฮจิมินห์ เคยพักอาศัย ณ บ้านนาจอก จ.นครพนม ปัจจุบันมีกล่องรับบริจาคเงินช่วยเหลือสถานที่
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และเย็นชา ในมิตรภาพของทั้งสองประเทศ กรณีของโฮจิมินห์ เป็นเครื่องหมายแสดงให้เห็นถึงพัฒนาการทางด้านความสัมพันธ์ในลักษณะดังกล่าวที่น่าสนใจยิ่ง

ในช่วงสงครามเย็น โฮจิมินห์ถูกมองจากชนชั้นนำในประเทศไทยว่าเป็นคอมมิวนิสต์ที่อยู่ในข่าย “ร้ายแรงที่สุด” ของกลุ่ม และเป็นผู้มีนโยบายโจมตีความมั่นคงของประเทศไทยรุนแรงเทียบได้กับสันติภาพและความมั่นคงในภูมิภาค ยังไม่ทันที่สงครามเย็นจะสิ้นสุดลง ผู้นำในประเทศไทยได้เปลี่ยนมุมมองต่อประธานโฮ และปรับให้เหมาะสมกับบริบทใหม่ ตัวอย่างที่เด่นชัด คือ บ้านอนุสรณ์โฮจิมินห์ และหมู่บ้านไทย - เวียดนามสัมพันธ์ ในจังหวัดนครพนม รวมทั้งพื้นที่ศึกษาประวัติศาสตร์ของประธานโฮในจังหวัดอุดรธานี

งานเขียนชิ้นนี้มีข้อเสนอว่า พื้นที่ตั้งของโฮจิมินห์ ได้มีบทบาทสำคัญในการส่งเสริมความเข้าใจ และความร่วมมือกันระหว่างไทย และเวียดนาม อย่างไรก็ตามพื้นที่ดังกล่าวก็อาจเป็นสาเหตุปัญหาความสัมพันธ์ของทั้งสองประเทศได้ หากภาพลักษณ์ของโฮจิมินห์ถูกนำไปใช้ประโยชน์ในทางที่ไม่เหมาะสม

Abstract

The relationship between Vietnam and Thailand has a long and multifaceted history. It has involved both state-to-state and people-to-people interactions. Modern history has witnessed the rise and fall, the warmth and the chill of bilateral relations between the two countries. Interestingly, the Ho Chi Minh factor seems to have put its stamp on every period of the development of this relationship.

During the Cold War, Ho Chi Minh was seen by the Thai elite as one of the “worst types” of communists whose policy posed a threat to Thai national security as well as to regional peace and stability. It was not until after the end of the Cold War that the Thai elite changed their perception of Ho to suit the new context. Prominent examples of the change are the commemorative house of Ho Chi Minh and the Thai-Vietnamese Friendship Village in Nakhon Phanom, as well as the site for historical studies of Ho in Udon Thani.

This paper argues that the Ho Chi Minh sites have played and will continue to play a significant role in boosting Thai-Vietnamese understanding and cooperation. However, these sites may also cause some problems for bilateral relations should the image of Ho Chi Minh be “utilized” improperly.

Introduction

On February 21, 2004, during the first joint-cabinet retreat between Thailand and Vietnam in Nakhon Phanom, the Thai-Vietnamese Friendship Village was inaugurated by the prime ministers of the two countries. At the heart of the village is the exhibition hall where Ho Chi Minh's life and the history of Thai-Vietnamese friendship are introduced. Not far from the exhibition is the cooperative house, which was restored in 2001. This is where Thau Chin, the alias Ho frequently used during his stay in Siam, lived and conducted his revolutionary activities from 1928 to 1929.

Some two years later after this first retreat, on May 15, 2006 another Ho Chi Minh venue, the Ho Chi Minh Educational and Tourism Historical Site, was officially opened at Ban Nong On, Tambon Chieng Pin, Muong District, Udon Thani. This site, like the one in Nakhon Phanom, is expected to function as both a catalyst for Thai-Vietnamese friendship and as an attraction to boost tourism in the northeastern region.

Both the Thai and Vietnamese leaders have hailed the sites as symbols of friendly bilateral relations which could help to enhance understanding and linkages between the two peoples. However, different opinions regarding the establishment of the sites, especially in terms of criticism over the rationale for esteeming Ho Chi Minh, suggest that problems in bilateral relations could arise if either the Vietnamese or the Thai exploit the image of Ho Chi Minh inappropriately and recklessly. This paper will examine the significance of the sites for the Thai-Vietnamese relationship. It will also try to determine some possible problems raised by these sites for bilateral relations between the two countries. The analysis will be followed by some suggestions.

Significance

In order to thoroughly understand the significance of the Ho Chi Minh sites in Thai-Vietnamese relations, it is necessary to go back to the baseline of the Cold War to observe Thai-Vietnamese confrontations as well as the Thai elite's perception of Ho Chi Minh. Accordingly, while Hanoi strategists saw [North] Vietnam as "a front station against imperialism and colonialism in Southeast Asia," (Luan, 2004 : 151) Bangkok elite, with political, economic and military support from the United States, defined Thailand as "a bastion to deter communism" from spreading in the region. As a result, the Vietnamese president and revered leader of the Vietnamese revolution, Ho Chi Minh, was characterized by the Thai military regime as a communist and totalitarian leader. They viewed him as responsible for threatening peace, stability and security in the region in the form of "communist expansion" and posing a threat to Thai national security given his phenomenal popularity among the Viet Kieu (overseas Vietnamese), dubbed "the fifth column," in Thailand. In the wake of Ho's death, Suthichai Yoon, a Thai reporter, commented, "When North Vietnamese President Ho died last year, the conflict between local Thais and the North Vietnamese reached an unprecedented climax.... Ho Chi Minh, to the Thais, is a 'bad' figure. And any expression of sorrow over his death in the streets of a Thai city is unbearable." (Bangkok Post October 4, 1970)

The confrontation between Thailand and Vietnam of the 1950s-1960s persisted throughout the next two decades. As in the Ho Chi Minh era, the Cold War ideological divergence continued to alienate Bangkok from Hanoi. The obsession with "the fifth column," given the enduring respect the Viet Kieu held for Ho Chi Minh, had been lingering on among the Thai elite; and anti-Vietnamese sentiments were blown up especially during the Cambodian conflict. Until the late 1990s, the Viet Kieu were still afraid to talk in public

about their late beloved leader. When the Thai authorities came up with the idea of reconstructing the area in Nakhon Pathom where Ho used to stay, the ethnic Vietnamese Thais dared not answer the Thai officials' and scholars' questions concerning the issue.

From an historical background, the establishment of the Ho Chi Minh sites in two northeastern Thai provinces undoubtedly marked a new chapter in Thai-Vietnamese relations. The Cold War ideological confrontation between the two regional rivals has been replaced by cooperation and friendship which are in line with the increasing trend of regionalism, especially within the ASEAN framework. The Thai government and the press now officially refer to Ho Chi Minh as a patriotic leader of the Vietnamese people. Moreover, Ho's image has been seen as a catalyst to boost bilateral relations between the two countries.

Mentioning Ho Chi Minh at the inauguration of the Thai-Vietnamese Friendship Village in Nakhon Phanom on February 21, 2004, Deputy Prime Minister General Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, who took the initiative in building the site,¹ remarked, "President Ho Chi Minh was not only a great leader of the Vietnamese people...but also a great man known by the whole world."² Addressing the event, the then Thai Premier Thaksin Shinawatra emphasized that the "Ho Chi Minh factor" is important to foster Thai-Vietnamese friendship. He said,

¹ According to Hoang Van Phuc, former representative of the Viet Kieu in Nakhon Phanom, and Dao Trong Ly, chairman of Nakhon Phanom's Viet Kieu Association, during his premiership Gen Chavalit initiated a project of building a Thai-Vietnamese friendship village at Ban Najok. However, the initiation could not be realized at that time due to many reasons. The information is also available at the Exhibition Hall in the friendship village at Ban Najok.

² Quoted in Gen. Chavalit's remark about the site, available at the Exhibition Hall in the friendship village at Nakhon Phanom.

I wish the Vietnamese Thais follow the teachings of President Ho Chi Minh, who is also Uncle Ho of Ban Na Chok. You should take these as a typical example in life. You surely remember that our Uncle Ho, when staying here, educated the Thais in raising fresh fish in a technical way, and always reiterated that people should be grateful to the land that sheltered them. Uncle Ho also always taught that the Thai-Vietnamese friendship was bridged by the Mekong River. Uncle Ho's thoughts further develop Thailand-Vietnam relations. (Khoan and Tien, 2003 : 131)

According to Vo Trong Tieu, the owner of the land where the Ho Chi Minh historical site is located, many delegations of Thai senior officials, including royalists and military generals, have visited the site. They all expressed their admiration for the Vietnamese national liberation cause led by Ho Chi Minh as well as his personal qualities.

This policy has been echoed by the Thai press. Unlike references to Ho in the Cold War period, he has recently been publicly depicted as the “founding father of Vietnam” (*The Nation* August 6, 1996), as a “great freedom fighter” (*Bangkok Post* April 24, 2000), the “father of the Vietnamese nation” (*Bangkok Post* July 18, 2000), and as a “Vietnamese national hero” (*Bangkok Post* February 20, 2004). The trend was clearly reflected in the Thai journalist Suthon Sukphisit's comment on Ho:

Every nation had its heroes. Methods of combat may differ, as do the historical eras in which the conflicts in which they distinguished themselves took place. But one thing that is always the same is the exalted status of a hero who fights for the country he loves. *Ho Chi Minh is one of the greatest of Vietnam's national heroes, but Thailand, too, played an important part in his achievement.* (*Bangkok Post* June 23, 2003 emphasis added)

In light of Ho's strong ideological and cultural legacy, as well as the policy promoting his thought in Vietnam, the Thai moves to promote the historical sites in Nakhon Phanom and Udon Thani are undoubtedly appreciated by Hanoi. In order to evaluate this attitude, it is important to explore these sites' significance to Vietnam in international, bilateral, and domestic spheres as well as in Hanoi's Viet Kieu policy.

Internationally, not only do the vestige sites in the former anti-communist “bastion” help to consolidate Ho Chi Minh's prestige, they also boost Vietnam's image in the world and in the region. Given Thailand's popularity as a tourist destination, the historical sites are expected to bring Ho's image as well as Vietnamese history and culture to not only Thais but also to international visitors. This, as a Vietnamese embassy official claimed, is “a golden opportunity that cannot be obtained by desire only.”³ Vo Trong Tieu, mentioned earlier, notes that since the Ho Chi Minh house was inaugurated, many international journalists as well as foreign tourists visited the site and interviewed him about Ho's life and activities during his stay in this province. In 2006, former Thai Ambassador Krit Kraichitti organized a delegation trip in which dozens of foreign ambassadors to Hanoi visited the Udon Thani site. Undoubtedly, these historical sites function as a propaganda means for Hanoi in its efforts to further integrate Vietnam into the globalized world.

In terms of policy, the inauguration of the Ho Chi Minh sites in Thailand helps to give more leverage to the Vietnamese Communist Party's promotion of Ho's thoughts as well as facilitating historical studies of Ho's life and

³ According to the interview with an embassy official in charge of the Viet Kieu issues, conducted in the Vietnamese Embassy in Bangkok on August 3, 2007.

activities abroad. According to Nguyen Thi Tinh, (*Bangkok Post* July 18, 2000) director of the Ho Chi Minh Museum in Hanoi, Vietnam plans to set up branches of the museum in the countries where Ho lived during his revolutionary days. The policy has two main purposes. First, these branches will allow Vietnamese curators to study more extensively Ho Chi Minh's life in other countries and to reconstruct his simple way of life in each location. Second, the sites are expected to help people know more about the relationship between Vietnam and the countries where the sites are located, and serve as the beginning of friendship among nations. To implement the policy, the first hurdle, confirmed Tinh, is to get approval from the host country. The Thai moves, therefore, must have impressed the Vietnamese and had a positive impact on their attitude toward the Thai.

As for bilateral relations, undoubtedly the Ho Chi Minh historical sites together with Bangkok's policy of granting citizenship to the Viet Kieu helped to reduce Hanoi's suspicion about its former Cold War rival. The Vietnamese see the presence of the vestigial sites of their leader on the Thai soil as a goodwill gesture offered by the Thai government to uphold mutual understanding between the two countries and two peoples. They also view it as "a progressive step" in the Thai elite's thinking given Bangkok's anti-communist stance during the Cold War.⁴ Addressing the inauguration ceremony of the friendship village in 2004, the Vietnam prime minister, Phan Van Khai, expressed sincere thanks to the government and people of Thailand and Nakhon Phanom for having built the village, describing it as a vivid manifestation of the friendship between the two nations.⁵ This view was

⁴ According to an interview with a former party senior official who used to be a Thai language interpreter for the late premier Pham Van Dong, conducted in Hanoi on January 5, 2008.

⁵ www.vietnambassay.or.th (the official website of the Vietnamese embassy in Bangkok).

confirmed by Foreign Minister Nguyen Dy Nien, who stated that the friendship village and the relics of Ho Chi Minh "helped to enhance understanding and linkage between the two peoples." (*Vietnamese Investment Review* July 2006)⁶ Acting Vietnamese Ambassador Nguyen Duy Hung reiterated it by boasting that the friendship village "is a friendly gift of Thai people to the Vietnamese." (*Vietnam Investment Review* July 2006)

In practical terms, the significance of the historical sites to Hanoi lies in the potential impact these locations may have on Thailand-Vietnam interactions, especially on the people-to-people level. First, given the past confrontation between the two regimes, the Ho Chi Minh sites could serve as diplomatic propaganda tools to help the Thais understand more about Vietnam, no longer as an "aggressive communist entity" as in the Cold War, but as a Southeast Asian country and a neighbor that shares the Mekong River. Second, the sites would help to convey Ho Chi Minh's image as Vietnam's national hero and a man of culture to the Thais, especially to those still haunted by the Cold War ideological confrontation.

The effects are more real than imagined. Since the inauguration of the Ho Chi Minh sites in Nakhon Phanom and Udon Thani, more and more local Thais have come to know about Ho Chi Minh and Vietnam. As was noted earlier, Vo Trong Tieu pointed out that numerous Thai senior officials, including royalists and military generals, have visited the Ho Chi Minh house at Ban Na Chok. They all expressed their admiration for the national liberation cause as well Ho Chi Minh's cultural qualities. Also many Thai scholars and

⁶ This is a special issue published by Vietnam's Ministry of Investment and Planning in combination with the Thai Embassy in Hanoi on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the establishment of Thai-Vietnamese diplomatic relations. The content of the magazine focuses on the bilateral relationship between Thailand and Vietnam since August 6, 1976.

students from north to south have visited the site for historical studies.⁷ At Ban Nong On, the Ho Chi Minh site has become part of the local community; and local people are used to referring to the site as “Ho Chi Minh.”⁸ In terms of academia, according to Thanyathip Sripana,⁹ a prominent Thai Vietnamese studies scholar, the historical sites in Nakhon Phanom and Udon Thani have encouraged “more in-depth and more open studies of Ho’s life and his anti-French activities, as well as the Vietnamese nationalist movement in Thailand during the colonial period.” These studies, she feels, will open the way for “more extensive academic and cultural cooperation between the two sides in studying Ho Chi Minh’s presence in Thailand.”

Besides the significance of the historical sites in diplomatic propaganda, these locations are expected to be instrumental in preserving Vietnamese traditions among the Viet Kieu and in uniting them to serve the Ho Chi Minh-initiated policy of people’s diplomacy. Overseas Vietnamese have long been seen as an important part of the Vietnamese national community. This view was reaffirmed by the 2006 Party Congress’s resolution, which stated that overseas Vietnamese are “an inseparable part and a resource of the Vietnamese national community” and are “an important factor contributing to boosting friendly and cooperative relations between our people and other peoples in the world.” (Vietnam Communist Party, 2006: 123) Clearly, the overseas Vietnamese or Viet Kieu are seen not only as a resource to

⁷ According to Vo Trong Tieu, Privy Council Chairman Prem once led a military-royalist delegation to visit the site and showed his respect to the late Vietnamese president. One general even stated, “President Ho Chi Minh is second to none in the world.” Also many Thai scholars and students from Thai universities have visited the Ho Chi Minh house. Interviews conducted in Nakhon Phanom on May 17, 2007.

⁸ Interviews conducted in Udon Thani in November 2007. Accordingly, when local people go to the Ho Chi Minh site, they say “Pai (go to) Ho Chi Minh.”

⁹ At www.rockmekong.org

contribute to national construction but also as a cultural bridge connecting Vietnam and the host country.

In Thailand, given Ho Chi Minh’s popularity among the Viet Kieu, the historical sites are expected to function as cultural centers for the Vietnamese community to pay respect to the late president as well as to preserve and reintroduce tradition through education. At the same time they are likely to contribute to building friendly relations and further understanding between Vietnam and Thailand. According to Hoang Van Phuc,¹⁰ former representative of the Viet Kieu in Nakhon Phanom, for overseas Vietnamese in Thailand who are yet to have a chance to visit their homeland and pay tribute to Ho Chi Minh at his mausoleum, coming to Nakhon Phanom to visit Uncle Ho’s house and the Thailand-Vietnam friendship village is “like a visit to the homeland.” As for the site in Udon Thani, Le Van Hy, chairman of the Viet Kieu Association in Udon, remarked that the location will be the place for organizing community activities of the ethnic Vietnamese Thais in the province, and for educating youth about Vietnamese traditions as well as building Viet-Thai friendship.¹¹

Possible Problems

As discussed above, both the Thai and Vietnamese leaders have hailed the Ho Chi Minh sites in Nakhon Phanom and Udon Thani as symbols of friendly bilateral relations which could help to enhance understanding and linkages between the two peoples. However, potential troubles concerning the Ho Chi Minh image still lie in wait.

First, though Hanoi and Bangkok seem to currently share the image of an international system with the goals of peace, stability, and cooperation for

¹⁰ At www.nhandan.com.vn

¹¹ At www.vapa.org.vn

economic development, basically the Thai worldview and the Vietnamese worldview have stemmed from different ideological systems. While the Thais uphold capitalism based on a constitutional monarchy with the king as the head of state, the Vietnamese believe in the “irreversible trend of socialism.” This ideological divergence could possibly cause problems relating to the Ho Chi Minh sites as they did during the implementation of these projects.

It is worth noting that a segment of the Thai elite, especially the conservatives, is still haunted by the ideological confrontation of the Cold War era. To them, Ho Chi Minh is somewhat still seen as an unwelcome communist. As some ethnic Vietnamese Thais in Nakhon Phanom recalled, during the 1980s anyone found to have Ho pictures in his or her house could be charged as a communist who needed to be gotten rid of. After Ho passed away in 1969, the Viet Kieu in the province renovated the Duc Thanh Tran (Tran Hung Dao) Temple to revere him and other Vietnamese national heroes. However, anti-Vietnamese measures were so harsh that the picture of Ho Chi Minh, which used to hang in the middle of the temple, had to be replaced by a picture of the sun.¹² This information is supplemented by a former Thai communist who pointed out that even the media during the 1980s avoided showing Ho’s picture.¹³ Until the late 1990s, the ethnic Vietnamese Thais had remained fearful of mentioning Ho Chi Minh in public or of talking about him even with Thai scholars.¹⁴ According to a Thai

¹² According to interviews conducted in Nakhon Phanom in May 2007.

¹³ According to the interview with a former Thai communist in Bangkok on November 14, 2007.

¹⁴ In an interview with Kavi Chongkittavorn of *The Nation*, Vo Trong Tieu, the owner of the land where Ho used to stay during his time in Nakhon Phanom, stated that he dared not tell anyone about who planted the *ma-phaeng* tree in his garden until recently (*The Nation* August 6, 1996). Moreover, Prof. Artha Nantachukra, who headed the Mahasarakham University team carrying out historical studies about Ho’s stay in Nakhon Phanom in preparation for the building of the Ho Chi Minh historical site, observed that they “realized anxiety and fear” among the informants (Artha, 2006).

professor, hitherto the conservative elite preferred to mention King Gia Long rather than Ho Chi Minh. The former, before he became king, had sought refuge in Siam following his defeat by the Tay Son and had received assistance from the Siamese court in his attempt to return to power in Vietnam. In the professor’s view, Nguyen Anh, as King Gia Long was called before his accession to the throne, was associated with the monarchy while Ho Chi Minh was a liberator.¹⁵

When the projects of building the Ho Chi Minh historical sites in Nakhon Phanom and Udon Thani were initiated, the plans came under fire on the grounds that Ho Chi Minh was a representative of the communist world. Regarding the project in Nakhon Phanom, Artha Nantachukra, who was in charge of the Mahasarakham University study team, commented, “Endless criticism has arisen from the start of the project to the present time, especially in terms of the questions such as ‘Why must Ho Chi Minh be esteemed?’” (Artha, 2006) The opponents even accused Artha of having Vietnamese origins given his role in the project. Some officials at the office of the National Security Council, Artha claims, expressed concerns about political effects the project might have. (*Bangkok Post* April 24, 2000)

At the first stage of the friendship village project, which started in 1999, several village heads in Tambon Nongyat, where the historical site is located, and some elderly Thais who were of the Cold War generation, were opposed to the plan on the grounds that Ho Chi Minh was a communist.¹⁶ In face of such opposition, even a number of the ethnic Vietnamese Thais expressed their concerns about the project’s “political consequences.” Until recently,

¹⁵ Based on an interview with a Thai senior professor at Chulalongkorn University on October 29, 2007.

¹⁶ Interviews with some ethnic Vietnamese Thais in Nakhon Phanom in May 2007.

many remained cautious about attending ceremonies held at the site on the occasion of Ho's birthday.

The project in Ban Nong On, Tambon Chieng Pin, Udon Thani faced the same problem. This area used to be referred to as a "Red Area" during the Vietnam War; and anti-communist measures were so harsh that almost all Vietnamese refugees who lived in the area had to move. As late as 1997, the local authorities, especially the police, still came to Nong On to question the Viet Kieu about communists. (Khoan and Tien, 2003: 101) Concerning the Ho Chi Minh historical site, the provincial authorities initially had to convene several meetings to discuss the issue after encountering such acute opposition from some village heads and elderly Thais who argued that Ho Chi Minh was a communist whose ideology went against the Thai tradition. Though provincial and *tambon* officials had generally given full support for the site since 2003, it was not until late 2005 that the project was able to be actively carried out. In 2005, Thai security agencies even questioned the motive of Chieng Pin's Nayok (*Or-Bor-Tor*), Mrs. Sokham, for advocating the Ho Chi Minh site project. At the time of the elections that year, the authorities had to postpone the project in order to circumvent possible political attacks from opponents.

Ethnic Vietnamese Thais who are members of the site management board recalled that when the provincial governor suggested that the Viet Kieu rebuild the historical site where Ho used to stay, some Viet Kieu faced opposition from several old local Thais just as those in Nakhon Phanom had. They expressed their caution about the initiative, worrying that it could be exploited for political purposes when the two countries were not on good terms. To overcome this hurdle, the ethnic Vietnamese Thais had to launch

a new round of "Thai-Vietnamese friendship building" in order to win the local Thais' support for the project.¹⁷

Second, because the concept of Thai-ness is still predominant in Thai society, the Ho Chi Minh sites and the ethnic Vietnamese Thais might be exposed to criticism should Ho's image be exploited for political purposes. According to Saichol Sattayanurak (*Bangkok Post* February 9, 2008), the concept of Thai-ness was defined to support a hierarchical social structure, stressing that everyone must "know his place" via Thai decorum, Thai language, and Thai ethics. Thai-ness "placed pressure on other races to 'become Thai'.... Those of other races who did not or could not truly become Thai did not receive certain rights from the state, did not find convenience in their contacts with bureaucrats, and were even oppressed in various ways, ranging from taunts to extortion and use of force." In recent years, events in the southernmost provinces where the majority of the population is of Malay stock suggests the concept's continued dominance. The presence of the Ho Chi Minh sites on Thai soil and the respect that the ethnic Vietnamese Thais hold for him, therefore, might be misinterpreted as "non-Thai."

¹⁷ From 1947 to 1975, "building Thai-Vietnamese friendship" was defined by the Vietnamese Communist Party's branch in Thailand as a "strategic issue" and a "matter of live or death" (Tuan, 1977: 53). Main policies, adopted throughout the "revolutionary period" and influenced by Ho Chi Minh's thought of "people's diplomacy," emphasized strategies, principles, and methods to promote the Thai-Vietnamese friendship. Consequently, during the Vietnam War, the Viet Kieu were able to win invaluable support and sympathy from not only the local people but also from local officials for their revolutionary activities. Concerning the project in Udon Thani, in order to win support of the local Thais for the Ho Chi Minh site, Vietnamese Thais took steps to introduce Ho Chi Minh's image to the local Thais, explaining the cultural and educational meanings of the site to ethnic Vietnamese as well as to Thai-Vietnamese relations, further contributing to socio-economic developments in the locality and helping Thai friends.

Third, with the Ho Chi Minh sites now being open to the public, political and cultural conflicts between the Viet-Thais and “other” Thais could arise given that the ethnic Vietnamese Thais sometimes over-express their enthusiasm for the sites and their love for the late Vietnamese president. After the inauguration of the sites in Nakhon Phanom and Udon Thani, the Viet-Thais in other provinces such as Sakon Nakhon and Nong Khai wanted to ask for similar sites to be built in these provinces. This, as Artha (2006) argues, “apparently provoked protest from the locals” in the name of “nationalism.” Some old Viet Kieu who were party cadres during the Vietnam War also express concerns that expression of enthusiasm from the ethnic Vietnamese Thais for their Uncle Ho may expose them to criticism from local Thais.

Finally, it is important to note that the vast majority of the Viet Kieu have received Thai citizenship. Not only did this open the way for them to be further integrated into Thai society but it also brought them political as well as economic rights equal to other Thai citizens. Given the economic condition of the Viet-Thais, which is by and large dominant in many northeastern provinces, (Thin and Thanyathip, 2006) and the relative unity of their community, the ethnic Vietnamese Thais have become important electoral constituencies that local politicians have to take into account. Unfortunately, their strong economic status and increasing political role in elections have exposed the Viet-Thais to more serious competition.¹⁸ Considering this background, any

¹⁸ Interviews conducted in Nakhon Phanom and Udon Thani in November 2007. Accordingly, the Viet-Thai community has been known as a relatively united group and their support helped to ensure the victory of local politicians who established good relations with them. Unlike many other Thais, Viet-Thais are not subject to vote-buying and cast their vote only for those politicians whom they think are the best choice. In the 2005 elections, local politicians who competed in the elections tried to win support from Viet-Thais by offering their community representatives free vacations. This provoked negative responses from supporters of these politicians’ opponents, especially Sino-Thais, for whom the Viet-Thais become a target.

ethnic Vietnamese Thais’ enthusiastic expression of love and respect for the late Vietnamese president may be used as an excuse for their economic as well as political marginalization.

Conclusion

With the presence of the Ho Chi Minh sites on Thai soil, the Ho Chi Minh factor will undoubtedly continue to play an important role in Thailand-Vietnam interactions. However, if Ho’s image is not appropriately employed, it can have negative impacts on Thailand-Vietnam relations. The concerned establishments of the two sides will need to work more closely within and among themselves to ensure that the significance and the objectives of these sites be realized. At the time that the data for this research project were being collected, the Vietnamese Embassy in Bangkok adopted an approach to the historical site in Udon Thani that differed from the official one held by the Ho Chi Minh Museum.¹⁹ Moreover, at the time the study was being wrapped up, some Thai tourism websites that introduced the Ho Chi Minh site in Nakhon Phanom were still presenting old and inaccurate information about the time span during which Ho stayed in Siam.²⁰

To put the historical sites into play in terms of boosting the friendship and understanding between the two countries and two peoples, some recommendations are offered as follows:

¹⁹ The embassy wanted to build a Ho Chi Minh house the actual size of the one in his hometown alongside the house where he stayed in Ban Nong On. However, the Ho Chi Minh Museum insisted that Ho Chi Minh museums abroad should simply demonstrate how Ho lived and worked in those countries. Those who wanted to see Ho’s house in his hometown should go to Vietnam.

²⁰ www.siamleisure.com; www.at-bangkok.com; www.thai-asia.com; www.chiangmai-mail.com. According to these websites, Ho Chi Minh spent seven years in Siam. However, the latest studies show that Ho stayed in Siam for about twenty months.

- Cultural cooperation and exchanges between Vietnam and Thailand on the people-to-people level should be further promoted and facilitated in various forms. The more people understand one another, the more friendship and cooperation can be established. In this respect, the concerned state agencies of the two countries need to further their cooperation. Also the press and the academia should take the lead in boosting people's understanding.

- Though the overwhelming majority of the Viet-Thais have received Thai citizenship, they should still take into account the method that their older generation applied during their revolutionary era, i.e. to build Viet-Thai friendships. The younger generation should actively function as a cultural bridge to bring the two peoples closer together. Moreover, they should appreciate the significance of the Ho Chi Minh sites in boosting the friendship between Thailand and Vietnam as well as remain aware of possible problems these sites may cause. Here the role of the Vietnamese Embassy can be important. However, the mission should have appropriate approaches since the Viet-Thais are now Thai citizens and any aggressive move related to them might be misinterpreted as an intervention in Thai internal affairs.

In order to actively put the historical sites into play, the Ho Chi Minh sites in Thailand should be confined to those already established in Nakhon Phanom and Udon Thani. What is needed now is to make these sites not only places for cultural and historical studies but tourist attractions as well.

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