

Revolution knows no boundaries? Chinese revolutionaries in North Vietnam during the early years of the First Indochina War

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This article analyses the roles and activities of three groups of Chinese communist revolutionaries in the early phase of the First Indochina War. The author argues that although the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) did not begin to provide substantial aid to North Vietnam until 1950, the involvement of Chinese communists, including members of both the CCP and the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP), in the First Indochina War started at the very moment the war broke out in 1946. Although the early participants were not as prominent as the Chinese political and military advisers who arrived after 1949, their activities deserve to be examined, not only because they were the forerunners of later actors, but also because they had already made concrete contributions to the Vietnamese revolution before the founding of the People's Republic of China and the arrival of large-scale Chinese military and economic aid. Moreover, interactions between early Chinese participants and the Vietnamese revolutionaries established a pattern that would characterise Sino–Vietnamese relations in the subsequent decades.

Studies on the involvement of Chinese communists in the First Indochina War have tended to focus on the period after the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 and the roles of prominent members of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), such as Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, Liu Shaoqi, Chen Geng, Wei Guoqing, and others.¹ Although it is true that the CCP did not begin to

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1 Qian Jiang 钱江, *Mimi zhengzhan: Zhongguo junshi guwentuan yuanyue kangfa jishi* 秘密征战: 中国军事顾问团援越抗法纪实 [A secret expedition: An account of the Aiding Vietnam and Resisting France Chinese Military Advisory Group], 2 vols. (Chengdu: Sichuan renmin, 1999); Spencer C. Tucker, *Vietnam* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1999), pp. 48–78; Zhai Qiang, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950–1975* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Chen Jian, *Mao's China and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); Huo Haidan 霍海丹, ed., *Zhongguo junshi guwentuan yuanyue kangfa shilu: Dangshiren de huiyi* 中国军

provide substantial aid to North Vietnam (the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, DRV) until 1950, the involvement of Chinese communists — including members of both the CCP and the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) — in the First Indochina War started at the very moment war broke out in 1946,² rather than in 1949 or 1950. Although the early actors were not as prominent as the leaders mentioned above, their activities in the First Indochina War deserve to be examined, not only because they were the forerunners of these later actors, but also because they had already made concrete contributions to the Vietnamese revolution before the PRC's founding and the arrival of large-scale Chinese military and economic aid. Moreover, interactions between early ethnic Chinese participants and Vietnamese revolutionaries established a pattern that would characterise future Sino-Vietnamese relations.

The ethnic Chinese revolutionaries who were active in northern Vietnam during the early years of the First Indochina War can be classified into three groups. The first consisted of those who had been living in Vietnam before the war started, became revolutionaries in Vietnam, and were members of revolutionary organisations created and based in Vietnam. They did not have direct contact with the CCP, although they might have lived and studied in China. The second group included those who had become revolutionaries in China, then moved to Vietnam for personal reasons, and might have lost contact with the CCP after moving to Vietnam. Still seeing themselves as revolutionaries, they became associated with Vietnamese or Vietnamese Chinese revolutionaries and began to work for the Vietnamese revolution. The last group comprised those who were sent to Vietnam by the CCP as individuals or groups for their own survival, or to aid the Vietnamese communists, or for both reasons.

There are widely different estimates about the number of ethnic Chinese living in northern Vietnam during the First Indochina War, ranging from 20,000³ to 60,000,⁴ 65,000,⁵ 90,000,⁶ 100,000,⁷ and over 100,000.⁸ Given that most of the more than

事顾问团援越抗法实录：当事人的回忆 [Accounts of the Aiding Vietnam and Resisting France Chinese Military Advisory Group: Memoirs of the participants] (Beijing: Zhonggong dangshi, 2002); Pan Yining 潘一宁, *Zhongmei zai Yinduzhina de duikang (1949-1973): Yuenan zhanzheng de guojiguan-xishi* 中美在印度支那的对抗：越南战争的国际关系史 (1949-1973) [The confrontation between China and the US in Indochina (1949-1973): A history of the international relations of the Vietnam War] (Guangzhou: Zhongshan daxue, 2011).

2 Although the ICP announced its dissolution in November 1945, the party still existed as an underground organisation till 1951, when it became the Vietnam Workers' Party.

3 Stern Lewis, 'Vietnamese communist policy toward the overseas Chinese, 1920-82' (PhD diss., University of Pittsburgh, 1984), p. 92.

4 Zhang Yu 张俞, *Yuenan Jianpuzhai Laowo huaqiao huaren manji* 越南柬埔寨老挝华侨华人漫记 [The Chinese in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos] (Hong Kong: Xianggang shehui kexue, 2002), p. 83.

5 Victor Purcell, *The Chinese in Southeast Asia* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 302.

6 Guo Shouhua 郭壽華, *Yuenan tongjian* 越南通鑒 [A handbook of Vietnam] (Taipei: Youth, 1961), p. 154; Shiu Wen-tang 許文堂, 'Guanyu Yuenan huaren renkou shuliang de lishi kaocha' 關於越南華人口數量的歷史考察 [A historical survey of the Chinese population in Vietnam], *Dongnanya jikan* 東南亞季刊 3, 3 (1998): 71.

7 Zhang Wenhe 張文和, *Yuenan huaqiao shihua* 越南華僑史話 [A history of the Chinese in Vietnam] (Taipei: Li Ming Cultural Enterprise, 1975), p. 43.

8 Yuenan Henei Zhonghua huiguan 越南河內中華會館, comp., 'Fayue chongtuxia zhi Yuebei huaqiao xianzhuang baogaoshu' 法越衝突下之越北華僑現狀報告書 [A report on the current conditions of the Chinese in northern Vietnam under the French-Vietnamese conflict], in *Minguo huaqiao shiliao huibian*

270,000 ethnic Chinese who moved from Vietnam to China in the late 1970s were from northern Vietnam, even the highest estimate listed above might still be much lower than the actual number. During the French colonial period, the French divided the Chinese in northern Vietnam into two categories: those who had adopted local citizenship and those who remained citizens of China. Members of the first group were treated as Vietnamese, and most of them were farmers, whereas members of the second group had to pay higher taxes and tended to be businesspeople.⁹ The DRV government established in 1945 did not try to define the status of the Chinese by law, and the Chinese in Vietnam ‘were considered citizens of China but were subject to Vietnamese authority wherever feasible’.¹⁰ From the perspectives of Chinese governments, whether Qing, Republic of China, or pre-1955 PRC, and the Chinese in northern Vietnam, there was no real difference between the two groups defined by the French, and the Chinese in Vietnam were all perceived to be citizens of China. As a result, the Chinese in northern Vietnam were often reminded to remain neutral in the conflict between the Vietnamese revolutionaries and the French colonialists.¹¹ However, many Chinese still actively participated in the First Indochina War, fighting for either Hồ Chí Minh’s Việt Minh or the French colonial regime.

The ethnic Chinese revolutionaries who fought for the Việt Minh could easily justify their actions within the framework of communist internationalism. As Christopher E. Goscha aptly points out, the later breakdown of the Sino-Vietnamese revolutionary alliance is not a good reason for dismissing communist internationalism as ‘mere hocus pocus’.¹² Collaboration between the Chinese and Vietnamese communists based on the spirit of internationalism started as early as the 1920s, and one of its strongest supporters was none other than Hồ Chí Minh, who lived in Guangzhou from 1924 to 1927, working for the Communist International (Comintern) and the Chinese revolution while training young Vietnamese revolutionaries. Many other Vietnamese communist leaders, including Trường Chinh, Võ Nguyên Giáp, Phạm Văn Đồng, and Hoàng Văn Hoan, had spent time in China and many had a good command of the Chinese language,¹³

民国华侨史料汇编 [Collected historical material on the Overseas Chinese of the Republican Period], ed. Geng Suli 耿素丽 and Zhang Jun 张军 (Beijing: Guojia tushuguan, 2011[1946]), vol. 8, p. 147.

9 Liao Yuan 廖源, *Chunfeng qiuyu* 春风秋雨 [Spring wind and autumn rain: A history of Tiên Yên] (Self-published, 2006), p. 17.

10 David Marr, *Vietnam: State, war, and revolution (1945–1946)* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), p. 313.

11 Yuenan Henei Zhonghua huiguan, ‘Fayue chongtuxia zhi Yuebei huaqiao’, pp. 148, 154–5, 157–8, 159.

12 Christopher E. Goscha, ‘Towards a connected history of Asian communism: The case of Sino-Vietnamese revolutionary overlaps’, in *China and Southeast Asia: Historical interactions*, ed. Geoff Wade and James K. Chin (London: Routledge, 2019), p. 319.

13 Huỳnh Kim Khánh, *Vietnamese communism, 1925–1945* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), pp. 63–7; Huang Zheng 黄铮, *Hu Zhiming yu Zhongguo* 胡志明与中国 [Hồ Chí Minh and China] (Beijing: Jiefangjun, 1987), pp. 17–110; Huang Wenhuan (Hoàng Văn Hoan) 黄文欢, *Canghai yisu: Huang Wenhuan geming huiyilu* 沧海一粟: 黄文欢革命回忆录 [A drop in the ocean: The revolutionary memoir of Huang Wenhuan], trans. Wen Zhuang 文庄 and Hou Hanjiang 侯寒江 (Beijing: Jiefangjun, 1987), pp. 63–158; William J. Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh: A Life* (New York: Hachette, 2000), pp. 105–45; Song Thành et al., *Nguyễn Ái Quốc ở Quảng Châu (1924–1927)* [Nguyễn Ái Quốc in Guangzhou, 1924–1927] (Hà Nội: Chính trị Quốc gia, 2018).

not to mention Vietnamese revolutionaries such as Hong Shui 洪水 (Hòng Thủy, birth name: Vũ Nguyên Bác, also known as Nguyễn Sơn), Li Ban 李班 (Ly Ban), and Huang Zhengguang 黄正光 (Nguyễn Khánh Toàn), who served in the CCP system for a long time, married Chinese women, and were therefore sometimes perceived to be too close to China and the Chinese by fellow Vietnamese revolutionaries.¹⁴ Some Vietnamese communists had close friends among the high-ranking Chinese revolutionaries. For instance, Hồ Chí Minh and Zhou Enlai first met each other in a subway station in Paris in 1922, and they then worked together in Guangzhou in the 1920s. Hồ even introduced five Chinese revolutionaries to the French Communist Party in the early 1920s. During his stay in Guangzhou from 1924 to 1927, he got to make friends with more Chinese communists, including Chen Geng, who would arrive in Vietnam in 1950 to serve as a military adviser.¹⁵ The collaboration between Chinese and Vietnamese revolutionaries during the First Indochina War was a natural extension of their previous cooperation.

Neither the Việt Minh nor the French colonial authorities were consistent about stopping the Chinese from participating in local politics. In fact, both sides saw the Chinese in northern Vietnam as a powerful community to win over, and they invited the Chinese to join the war on their respective sides. In order to win Chinese support, the rival governments promised at the beginning of the First Indochina War that they would guarantee their safety.¹⁶ On the part of the Việt Minh, shortly after declaring the independence of Vietnam on 2 September 1945, Hồ Chí Minh issued a public letter to the Chinese in Vietnam, in which he confirmed that both the Vietnamese and Chinese were oppressed peoples who had suffered under the rule of the French and the Japanese. He promised that his government would revoke all the 'evil laws' the French had imposed on the Chinese and would protect their lives, property, and freedom. He urged the Chinese and Vietnamese to overcome the barriers between them and to build the new Vietnam together.¹⁷ One of the barriers between the Chinese and Vietnamese at that time was the Vietnamese disdain for the Chinese in Vietnam caused by the occupation of northern Vietnam from September 1945 to June 1946 by 50,000 or more Guomindang (GMD; Chinese Nationalist Party) troops, who brought additional economic hardship.¹⁸

14 Peng Su 彭苏, 'Hong Shui: Cong geming qingnian dao "liangguo jiangjun"' 洪水: 从革命青年到'两国将军' [Hong Shui: From a revolutionary youth to a general of two countries], *Hongyan chunqiu* 红岩春秋, 1 (2020): 30–33; Lai Chen 赖晨, 'Yuegong dangyuan Li Ban zai Min-Yue-Gan bian' 越共党员李班在闽粤赣边 [The Vietnamese communist Ly Ban in the Fujian-Guangdong-Jiangxi Border Region], *Wenshi tiandi* 文史天地, 2 (2016): 62–6; Li Xinhua 李新华 and Li Nianyun 李念芸, 'Cengwei Zhonggong dangyuan de Yuenan buzhang: Guojizhuyi zhanshi Li Ban' 曾为中共党员的越南部长: 国际主义战士李班 [A minister of Vietnam who was once a CCP member: The internationalist fighter Ly Ban], in *Fubeimen de Zhongguo meng* 父辈们的中国梦 [The China dream of our older generation], ed. Li Minniu 李民牛 (Hong Kong: Zijing, 2016), pp. 118–25; Wu Bailan 伍白兰, *Shanshui xiangyi: Yige yiguo jiating de lihebeihuan* 山水相依: 一个异国家庭的离合悲欢 [We share mountains and rivers: The sorrowful separation and joyful reunion of a binational family] (Hong Kong: Tiandi tushu, 2000).

15 Huang Zheng 黄铮, *Hu Zhiming yu Zhongguo*, pp. 8–9, 22–30.

16 Yuenan Henei Zhonghua huiguan, 'Fayue chongtuxia zhi Yuebei huaqiao', p. 148.

17 Huang Zheng, *Hu Zhiming yu Zhongguo*, pp. 112–13.

18 Lewis, 'Vietnamese communist policy', p. 112; Greg Lockhart, *Nation in arms: The origin of the People's Army of Vietnam* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1989), pp. 173–4. According to other sources, the number of Chinese Nationalist troops in northern Vietnam was higher or even much higher than

In the fighting between the French and the Việt Minh taking place in Hải Phòng and Hà Nội in November and December of 1946, the Việt Minh stationed most of its troops in the Chinese quarters partly to force the Chinese to side with the Vietnamese revolutionaries. For the same purpose, the Việt Minh was quick to offer aid to the Chinese who had been attacked by the French.¹⁹ On 29 December 1946, ten days after the outbreak of the First Indochina War, Hồ Chí Minh issued a second public letter to the Chinese in Vietnam, pledging once again the protection of their lives and property, and calling on them to join hands with their Vietnamese compatriots in the war against the French imperialists.²⁰ Ho's positions show a continuity with Comintern instructions and ICP policies adopted in the 1930s, which stated that the Chinese in Vietnam were different from the colonialists and they had the potential to become allies of the Vietnamese revolutionaries.²¹ However, Hồ Chí Minh had made it clear in the early 1940s that the Vietnamese revolution was to be led by Vietnamese rather than ethnic Chinese.²² In other words, the Chinese in Vietnam could only serve as allies but not leaders of the Vietnamese revolutionaries. Nonetheless, winning the support of the Chinese in Vietnam was compatible with both the ICP's United Front policy and Hồ Chí Minh's version of the People's War strategy adopted by the underground ICP during the First Indochina War.²³ For the purpose of mobilising the Chinese in Vietnam, in 1948, the underground ICP created the Central Committee for Overseas Chinese Movement (中央华运委员会), and the DRV government set up the Bureau for Overseas Chinese Affairs (华侨事务署).²⁴

There was also a practical reason for Hồ Chí Minh and the Việt Minh to show goodwill toward the Chinese in Vietnam. As a pragmatic leader, Hồ Chí Minh made

50,000. Jean Sainteny, *Ho Chi Minh and his Vietnam: A personal memoir* (Chicago: Cowles, 1972), pp. 48–9, 53, 63; Vo Nguyen Giap, *Unforgettable days* (Hà Nội: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1975), pp. 35–7, 235–6; Jacques Dalloz, *The war in Indo-china, 1945–54*, trans. Josephine Bacon (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1990), p. 65; Lin Hua, 'The Chinese occupation of northern Vietnam, 1945–1946: A reappraisal', in *Imperial policy and Southeast Asian nationalism 1930–1957*, ed. Hans Antlöv and Stein Tønnesson (Surrey: Curzon, 1995), p. 153; Peter Worthing, *Occupation and revolution: China and the Vietnamese August Revolution of 1945* (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California at Berkeley, 2001), pp. 57–8, 69–71, 173; Marr, *Vietnam*, pp. 298–309. Whereas all the other authors seem to endorse the view that the Chinese Nationalist troops did cause much trouble in Vietnam, Peter Worthing argues that the impact of the Chinese occupation on local society was not all negative.

19 King C. Chen, *Vietnam and China, 1938–1954* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), p. 171.

20 Huang Zheng, *Hu Zhiming yu Zhongguo*, pp. 120–21.

21 Zhuang Yong 庄庸, 'Yuenan huaqiao yongshi mingji Huzhuxi de enqing' 越南华侨永世铭记胡主席的恩情 [The Chinese in Vietnam will forever remember Chairman Hu's kindness], *Xin Yue hua bao* 新越华报 [New Vietnamese Chinese News], 7 Nov. 1969; Zhuang Yong 庄庸, 'Sishinianlai zai Yuenan laodongdang lingdaoxia de Yuenan huaqiao' 四十年在越南劳动党领导下的越南华侨 [The Chinese in Vietnam under the leadership of the Vietnam Workers' Party in the past 40 years], *Xin Yue hua bao*, 3 Feb. 1970.

22 Huang Wenhuan (Hoàng Văn Hoan), *Canghai yisu*, p. 120.

23 For a thorough treatment of the ICP's United Front policy and its relevance to the Chinese in Vietnam, see Lewis, 'Vietnamese communist policy', pp. 42–56, 77–112. For the evolution of Hồ Chí Minh's People's War strategy see William Duiker, 'Ho Chi-Minh and the strategy of People's War', in *The First Vietnam War: Colonial conflicts and Cold War crisis*, ed. Mark Atwood Lawrence and Fredrik Logevall (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), pp. 152–74.

24 Zhuang Yong, 'Sishinianlai zai Yuenan laodongdang lingdaoxia de Yuenan huaqiao'.

great efforts to win Chinese Nationalist support during and immediately after the war against Japan, and he believed that winning the hearts of the Chinese in Vietnam would help him gain the support of the Chinese Nationalists, who made the protection of the Chinese in Vietnam a priority in their dealings with both the Việt Minh and the French.²⁵ In order to appease the Chinese Nationalists, Hồ and his followers tried hard to convince people that they were not communists. They also tried to keep secret their cooperation with the CCP and prevent the Chinese communists in Vietnam from openly criticising the Chinese Nationalist government. According to King C. Chen, Hồ made his last appeal for Chinese Nationalist support in late 1948, when it became apparent that the CCP would win the Chinese Civil War.²⁶

The French also tried to gain the support of the Chinese in Vietnam by adopting more benevolent policies toward them than toward the Vietnamese. At the beginning of the war, the French bombed the Vietnamese quarters in Hải Phòng but not the Chinese quarter, and while they would arrest any suspicious Vietnamese that they could find they were more cautious in dealing with the Chinese. The French even claimed that their purpose in attacking Hải Phòng in late 1946 was to protect the Chinese there.²⁷ A CCP military adviser was surprised to discover in 1950 that the French troops stationed in the city of Lạng Sơn razed the entire city to the ground with bombs before their withdrawal but left the Chinese quarter intact.²⁸ There is evidence that many of the city's 5,000 Chinese residents sided with the French in the conflict.²⁹ One reason for this good relationship was that the French, in order to persuade the GMD to hand over northern Vietnam, had promised the GMD government in the Sino-French Treaty signed in Chongqing in early 1946 that they would grant the Chinese in Vietnam trade, tariff, and travel privileges, and would also establish a free trade zone in Hải Phòng to facilitate the transit of Chinese goods. Legally, the Chinese in Vietnam enjoyed the same treatment as French citizens.³⁰ The GMD government insisted on making the protection of Chinese in Vietnam part of its agreement with France about the withdrawal of Chinese troops from northern Vietnam because the French troops that reoccupied Laos and southern Vietnam had committed atrocities against the Chinese there.³¹

Neither the Việt Minh nor the French fully delivered on their promise of protecting the Chinese. Both sides attacked certain groups of Chinese 'bandits',³² partly because they did not believe that all the Chinese could be won over or remain neutral, and they were right. The French showed no mercy to the Chinese revolutionaries but would offer protection and support to those Chinese who were loyal to the colonial government. The French even permitted the Hakka Chinese led by Võòng A Sáng

25 General Lu Han, commander-in-chief of the Chinese occupation force, even personally delivered complaints to the DRV government on behalf of the Chinese in northern Vietnam. Marr, *Vietnam*, p. 311.

26 Chen, *Vietnam and China*, pp. 176–9, 187.

27 Yuenan Henei Zhonghua huiguan, 'Fayue chongtuxia zhi Yuebei huaqiao', pp. 134, 149, 168, 170, 172.

28 Huo Haidan, *Zhongguo junshi guwentuan yuanyue kangfa shilu*, pp. 238–9.

29 Marr, *Vietnam*, pp. 312–13.

30 Lewis, 'Vietnamese communist policy', pp. 112–13; Lin Hua, 'The Chinese occupation', pp. 161–2.

31 Worthing, *Occupation and revolution*, pp. 121–3, 128–36, 139–41.

32 Yuenan Henei Zhonghua huiguan, 'Fayue chongtuxia zhi Yuebei huaqiao', pp. 149–50, 162, 174.

to create an autonomous region in Hải Ninh.³³ Needless to say, Chinese like Voòng A Sáng were treated as deadly enemies by the Việt Minh and its Chinese allies. The Việt Minh also did not recognise the import and export tax exemption the French had granted to the Chinese and the Vietnamese-French dispute over the control of the customs in Hải Phòng caused serious conflicts in late 1946.³⁴

The Chinese revolutionaries who were active in northern Vietnam before 1950 tended to form their own groups; they participated in the war collectively, although there were individual Chinese who immersed themselves in the Vietnamese revolution and who were not members of any Chinese or overseas Chinese organisations. Of the many overseas Chinese revolutionary organisations created during the First Indochina War, some were under the sole supervision of the underground ICP before 1951 or the Vietnamese Workers' Party (VWP) after 1951, and some were jointly supervised by the CCP and the underground ICP or VWP. These organisations played different roles in the war, and their relations with the Vietnamese communist leaders were also different, which partially caused their different fates.

In this article, I will examine the rise and fall of three overseas Chinese revolutionary organisations that were active in northern Vietnam during the early years of the First Indochina War — the Independent Regiment, Central Bureau of Political Security, and Hải Phòng Overseas Chinese New Democracy Union of Vietnam — focusing on the triangular interactions among ethnic Chinese revolutionaries, the CCP, and the ICP or VWP. The main sources are the memoirs and biographies of the Chinese revolutionaries who participated in the First Indochina War, and these are supplemented by information gathered through oral interviews and from secondary sources. My analysis will show that whereas common interest and ideology brought the Chinese and Vietnamese revolutionaries together, national interest and sentiment sometimes still caused serious conflicts between the fighting allies, and such cycles of confrontation-within-alliances or confrontation-supplanting-alliances would be repeated in subsequent decades. By focusing more on these diverse personal and local experiences, this article will complement the few published studies that cover the pre-1950 collaboration between the Chinese and Vietnamese communists.³⁵

33 For a brief history of the autonomous region of Hải Ninh, see Trần Đức Lai, ed., *Người Nùng và Khu Tự Trị Hải Ninh Việt Nam* (The Nung People and the Hải Ninh Autonomous District of Vietnam) (Self-published, 2007); Trần Đức Lai, ed., *The Nung Ethnic and Autonomous Territory of Hai Ninh, Vietnam* (Taipei: Hai Ninh Veterans and Public Administration, 2013).

34 Marr, *Vietnam*, pp. 281–2, 312.

35 Chen, *China and Vietnam*; Laura M. Calkin, *China and the First Vietnam War, 1947–54* (London: Routledge, 2013); Goscha, 'Towards a connected history', pp. 314–34; Jiayi Gao, 'Fighting side by side: Cross-border military exchanges and cooperation between the Chinese Communist Party and the Viet Minh, 1945–1949', *China Review* 19, 3 (2019): 123–48; Xiaorong Han 韩孝荣, 'Guoji lengzhan chuqi de yige defang redian—1945 nian zhi 1950 nian jian de zhongyue bianjing kuoguo gemingqu' 国际冷战初期的一个地方热点—1945年至1950年间的中越边境跨国革命区 [A hotspot during the early phase of the global Cold War: The Sino-Vietnamese cross-border revolutionary zone, 1945–1950], *Nanyang wenti yanjiu* 南洋问题研究 1 (2021): 1–14.

Pang Zi and the Independent Regiment

Pang Zi was born in Beihai, Guangdong in 1919³⁶ and joined the CCP in 1938. In late 1945, while a low-ranking cadre in the Chinese communist system, he was dispatched by the CCP's southern Guangdong branch to Vietnam to discuss two issues with the Vietnamese communists; the first was the entry of a CCP military unit into Vietnam. Pang Zi was instructed to inform the Vietnamese communists that the First Regiment of the Southern Guangdong Anti-Japanese People's Liberation Army (广东南路人民抗日解放军), a CCP armed force created in May 1945 and based in southern Guangdong, planned to enter Vietnam to escape GMD attack. The local CCP leaders wanted their Vietnamese comrades to help find a place to station the regiment and to provide supplies for it. The second issue was the mobilisation and organisation of the Chinese living in Vietnam. Pang Zi had heard that the Vietnamese communists had expressed the desire to invite some CCP members to Vietnam to help mobilise the Chinese living there. Pang was instructed to inform the Vietnamese communists that the CCP would be willing to help promote revolution among the Chinese in Vietnam.³⁷

One reason why Pang Zi was chosen for this mission was that his classmate and friend Zhao Shiyao had been living in Vietnam and had even secured a position in the newly created Vietnamese communist government led by Hồ Chí Minh. Zhao was the one who had brought Pang Zi into the CCP and who had transmitted the message that the Vietnamese communists wanted their Chinese comrades to help mobilise the Chinese in Vietnam. Pang Zi found Zhao Shiyao immediately after arriving in Hải Phòng from Zhanjiang in late 1945.³⁸ Zhao then introduced Pang Zi to Wu Qimei (Ngô Kỳ Mai), who would become a very important contact for Pang. Wu had been a middle school classmate of Zhao Shiyao and was one of the most influential Chinese revolutionaries in northern Vietnam at that time. He was an official in the DRV's Ministry of Public Security and had direct contact with high-ranking Vietnamese communists, including Hồ Chí Minh. In fact, he was the one who had helped Zhao Shiyao secure a position in the Hải Phòng Bureau of Public Security.³⁹

With Wu Qimei's assistance, Pang Zi had two meetings with Lê Đức Thọ, a high-ranking ICP leader; Wu also served as interpreter during the two meetings. Pang Zi's superior within the CCP had instructed him to approach Hồ Chí Minh

36 In 1965, the boundary between Guangdong and Guangxi was redrawn and since then Beihai has been part of the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region.

37 Pang Zi 庞自, *Jiuzhi yiwang* 九秩忆往 [The memoir of a nonagenarian] (Beijing: Self-published, 2011), pp. 55–6. The Southern Guangdong Anti-Japanese People's Liberation Army had another name, which was Southern Guangdong People's Liberation Army (南路人民解放军). See Tang Caiyou 唐才猷, 'Laoyituan zhandou zai Shiwandashan' 老一团战斗在十万大山 [The Old First Regiment fighting in the Shivan Great Mountains], in *Zhandou zai Shiwandashan* 战斗在十万大山 [Fighting in the Shivan Great Mountain], ed. Lu Wen (Nanning: Guangxi minzu, 1995), pp. 138, 141.

38 For an account of Zhao Shiyao as a communist leader in Beihai in 1938 see He Jiaying 何家英, 'Huiyi Zhao Shiyao tongzhi' 回忆赵世尧同志 [My memory of Comrade Zhao Shiyao], *Beihai wenshi* 北海文史 5 (1987): 107–9; Chen Zhongtian 陈中天, 'Kangzhan chuqi Beihai dangzuzhi de tongzhan ji dixia huodong' 抗战初期北海党组织的统战及地下活动 [The United Front work and underground activities of the CCP's Beihai branch during the early years of the Anti-Japanese War], *Beihai wenshi* 5 (1987): 73–83.

39 Pang Zi, *Jiuzhi yiwang*, pp. 56–7.

directly after arriving in Vietnam, but Lê Đức Thọ told Pang that Hồ Chí Minh was too busy to meet him in person, and Wu assured Pang in private that Thọ was powerful enough to make decisions regarding relations between the two parties. During the two meetings, Thọ told Pang that the Vietnamese revolutionaries welcomed the CCP forces moving into Vietnam and would provide necessary assistance. Thọ also confirmed that it was true that the Vietnamese communists wanted their Chinese comrades to help with promoting revolution among the Chinese in Vietnam. Thọ hoped that as the first step the CCP could help publish a Chinese-language newspaper in Vietnam. Pang promised that he would help move a private printing shop from Zhanjiang to Vietnam to help publish a Chinese-language newspaper, and Thọ later provided money to cover the expenses for that project.⁴⁰

It should be noted that this was neither the first nor the last time that Hồ Chí Minh and his party asked the CCP to dispatch people to Vietnam to help promote revolution there. In the early 1940s, Hồ Chí Minh had asked the CCP to send back to Vietnam some Vietnamese communists who had been working in China. Hồ wanted them to return home to help fight the Japanese invaders in Vietnam. In 1945, upon Hồ Chí Minh's request, Hong Shui (Nguyễn Sơn), Huang Zhengguang 黄正光 (Nguyễn Khánh Toàn), and Liang Jinshan were sent back to Vietnam. All three were born in Vietnam, and Liang was half-Chinese. Liang was poisoned to death in 1946 by the Chinese Nationalists when he was negotiating with them on behalf of the Việt Minh, Hong Shui returned to China in 1950 and became the only foreigner who was awarded the title of general in the PLA in 1955, and Nguyễn Khánh Toàn stayed in Vietnam to serve as a ministerial level official in the DRV government.⁴¹ In 1950, it was also because of Hồ Chí Minh's request that Mao Zedong dispatched Chen Geng, Wei Guoqing and other PLA officers to Vietnam to serve as advisers.

Obviously, of the two issues that Pang Zi discussed with Lê Đức Thọ, namely, the entry of a CCP military unit into Vietnam and the mobilisation of the Chinese there, the former was more important to the CCP than the latter, and the latter was more important to the ICP than the former. It seems that Pang Zi was not the only CCP delegate sent to Vietnam to negotiate on the first issue. Liang You, a veteran communist based in western Guangxi, was one of three other delegates who were sent to Vietnam to discuss the same issue with the Vietnamese communists. Liang remembered that initially the Vietnamese communists were not willing to permit the CCP forces to enter Vietnam, but gave their approval after the three held meetings with senior Vietnamese communists Hoàng Văn Hoan and Hoàng Văn Thái, both of whom had close connections with Chinese revolutionaries. Liang You and his colleagues later even moved the headquarters of the CCP's Left River region branch to a forest area in Vietnam.⁴²

40 Ibid., pp. 57–8.

41 Peng Su, 'Cong geming qingnian dao "liangguo jiangjun"', p. 32; 'Liang Jinsheng: Tongxiao siguo yuyan de kangzhan yingjie' 梁金生: 通晓四国语言的抗战英杰 [Liang Jinsheng: A hero of the Anti-Japanese War who was proficient in four languages], *Shenzhen wanbao* 深圳晚报, 5 Nov. 2015.

42 Liang You 梁游, 'Zhongyue youyi wangu changqing' 中越友谊万古长青 [The Sino-Vietnamese friendship will last forever], in *Jingsong: Mianhuai Liang You tongzhi* 劲松: 缅怀梁游同志 [A sturdy

Pang Zi went back to Zhanjiang in December 1945 to report to his superiors and then returned to Hà Nội in February 1946 to continue to serve as an informal messenger for the CCP's southern Guangdong branch in Vietnam. The First Regiment, which later became known as the Old First Regiment after the creation of the New First Regiment in southern Guangdong, did move to Vietnam from southern Guangdong in early 1946, disguised as Vietnamese troops.⁴³ The presence of Chinese Nationalist troops in northern Vietnam was one of the reasons why the CCP troops had to disguise themselves as Vietnamese forces. In June 1946, the CCP's Guangdong branch also considered moving the CCP forces on Hainan Island to northern Vietnam to avoid being exterminated by the GMD, but Feng Baiju, the stubborn legendary leader of the CCP forces in Hainan, refused to move his troops out of his native island.⁴⁴

Pang Zi did not join the Old First Regiment, which was stationed in Cao Bằng, Lạng Sơn, and Nghệ An (see [Map 1](#)).⁴⁵ Instead, he stayed in Hà Nội to help maintain communications between the two parties. In Hà Nội, he met Lê Đức Thọ again and was also introduced to Hoàng Văn Hoan. In June 1946, the CCP's South China Bureau, based in Hong Kong, dispatched Zhou Nan to Hà Nội to serve as its formal delegate to Vietnam, and Pang Zi became Zhou's messenger and assistant. Pang also tried to build contacts with the Chinese living in Vietnam and help with the printing business. Zhou Nan had been a head of the southern Guangdong branch, and he stayed in Vietnam for about a year. After his departure, Zhuang Tian, who had participated in the Long March and served as a top commander of the CCP forces in Hainan, became its leading representative in northern Vietnam. Zhuang arrived in Cao Bằng in September 1947 to command the Old First Regiment and serve as a senior military adviser to the Vietnamese communist forces. In fact, he was the first high-ranking CCP military adviser sent to northern Vietnam during the First Indochina War and was thus a predecessor of General Chen Geng and General Wei Guoqing who would arrive in Vietnam in 1950. Zhou and Zhuang were the highest-ranking Chinese communists who worked in northern Vietnam before 1950.⁴⁶

After the arrival of Zhou Nan in Hà Nội in mid-1946, Lê Đức Thọ suggested that a committee be created to oversee the affairs of the Chinese in Vietnam, and this led to the formation of the Overseas Chinese Working Committee, with Zhou Nan as its

pine tree: Remembering Comrade Liang You] (Nanning: Guangxi renmin, 1997), pp. 120–21. For the interactions between Vietnamese revolutionaries, including Hoàng Văn Hoan, and their Chinese comrades in China, 1930s–1950s, see Huang Wenhuan (Hoàng Văn Hoan), *Canghai yisu*, pp. 63–285.

43 Lu Wen 卢文, *Zhandou zai Shiwandashan*, pp. 6, 156; Feng De 冯德, 'Wo suo zhidao de duli zhongtuan' 我所知道的独立中团 [My knowledge about the Independent Regiment], in *Wenshan qiaoshi ziliao huibian* 文山侨史资料汇编 [Collected material on the history of the Overseas Chinese from Wenshan], ed. Wenshanzhou guiguo huaqiao lianhehui 文山州归侨华侨联合会 (Kunming: n.p., 2006), pp. 106–10; Chen Zhang 陈章, 'Laoyituan ru Yue kangfa jishu' 老一团入越抗法记述 [The Old First Regiment resisted the French in Vietnam], *Zhanjiang wenshi* 湛江文史 28 (2009): 23–4.

44 Li Minniu, ed., *Fubeimen de Zhongguo meng*, p. 314.

45 Ibid., p. 231.

46 King C. Chen claims that Liao Chengzhi and Fang Fang, who were higher ranking than Zhou Nan and Zhuang Tian in the CCP system, visited northern Vietnam in 1947, but provides no evidence (Chen, *China and Vietnam*, pp. 188–9). Most other sources show that Liao Chengzhi was in northern China and Fang Fang was in Hong Kong in 1947, and neither of them appeared in Vietnam in that year.



Map 1. Important Places in the Sino-Vietnamese Cross-border Revolutionary Zone

head and several CCP representatives from Guangdong, Guangxi, and Yunnan as members. However, the committee failed to accomplish much, and it became dormant after holding one or two meetings.⁴⁷

Shortly after the First Indochina War began in December 1946, Pang Zi and another CCP member, Yu Mingyan, felt that there was not much they could do in Hà Nội to help with the war effort.⁴⁸ Pang and Yu then wrote to Hồ Chí Minh and volunteered to go to the four northeastern provinces, Quảng Yên, Bắc Giang, Hải Ninh, and Lạng Sơn (see [Map 1](#)), to organise anti-French self-defence forces among the Chinese living there. All four provinces had relatively large ethnic Chinese communities. Hồ Chí Minh supported their proposal and promised to offer assistance, but also warned them that they would face many difficulties. They carried Hồ's written reply with them and went first to Quảng Yên province near Hải Phòng. The local Vietnamese communist leaders were very supportive. They gave the pair some money and promised to provide more funds and supplies. The Vietnamese communists also wanted Pang Zi and Yu Mingyan to help improve

47 Pang Zi, *Jiuzhi yiwang*, pp. 60–64.

48 Pang Zi's ally Yu Mingyan was born in Guangzhou in 1916. He joined the CCP in 1937 and graduated from Sun Yat-sen University in 1938. He was dispatched to Vietnam by the southern Guangdong branch of the CCP in August 1946 and stayed there for about a year before becoming a leading revolutionary in Guangxi. See Lang Ji 朗基, Xiao Gang 小刚, Xiao Hua 小华, and Xiao Dong 小东, 'Shizhi geming, jüggong jingcui: Jinian fuqin Yu Mingyan bainian danchen' 矢志革命, 鞠躬尽瘁: 纪念父亲余明炎百年诞辰 [Fully devoted to the Revolution: Commemorating the one hundredth birthday of our father Yu Mingyan] (unpublished article).

relations between the Chinese and the Vietnamese communities in the region, since there had been some inter-communal conflicts.⁴⁹

It did not take long for Pang and Yu to organise a group of over ten revolutionaries in Hoàn Bò, Quảng Yên, several of whom had participated in the Anti-Japanese War in China. Pang Zi then went to Thái Bình and brought back a group of over ten fighters who had relocated from China to Vietnam. The two groups were then merged and they started to attack the French. Their brave actions even won the praise of General Võ Nguyên Giáp, the commander-in-chief of the Vietnamese communist forces. By late May 1947, Pang Zi's armed group had expanded to over 100 fighters, after which they publicly announced the formation of the Overseas Chinese People's Self-Defence Regiment of the Northeastern District of Northern Vietnam (越北东北区华侨民众自卫团), with Yu Mingyan as its political commissar and Pang Zi as the director of its political department.⁵⁰ The commander was Li Hanwei, an ethnic Zhuang from Guangxi who had been an officer in the Old First Regiment, and the deputy commander was Huang Dequan, who was from Guangxi but had spent much time in Hải Ninh and had many connections there.⁵¹

Two months later, the self-defence regiment was merged with another overseas Chinese military unit in Bắc Giang, which had been created by a section of the Old First Regiment stationed there. The new unit, which now had two to three hundred fighters from Quảng Yên, Lạng Sơn and Bắc Giang, became known as the Independent Regiment of the Vietnam National Army (越南国家军队独立中团), with Huang Bing as its commander and Pang Zi as political commissar.⁵² Among the four leaders of the self-defence regiment, Li Hanwei, Huang Dequan, Yu Mingyan, and Pang Zi, Pang and Huang stayed to serve as leaders of the Independent Regiment, whereas Li Hanwei and Yu Mingyan were sent back to China.⁵³ The Vietnam National Army had been created in 1946 by reorganising all the Vietnamese communist armed units that had been created since 1944. According to regulations issued by Hồ Chí Minh, soldiers serving in the Vietnam National Army 'had to be between eighteen and thirty, be declared fit by an army doctor, and know how to read and write *quoc ngu*, the Romanised Vietnamese script'.⁵⁴ Obviously, not all members of the Independent Regiment met these requirements. Very likely Pang Zi was not able to read and write *quoc ngu*.

At the time of its creation, the Independent Regiment was much smaller than a normal regiment in the Vietnam National Army, which could have up to 1,500 fighters.⁵⁵ The regiment had expanded to about 1,000 fighters by 1948 and over 1,200 fighters by early 1949. These fighters came from different places in northern

49 Pang Zi, *Jiuzhi yiwang*, p. 66.

50 *Ibid.*, p. 68.

51 Shen Yaouxun 沈耀勋, 'Cong Naliang qiyi dao Xinjie shibian' 从那良起义到'新街事变' [From the Naliang Revolt to the Xinjie Incident], in Lu Wen, *Zhandou zai Shiwandashan*, pp. 119, 123–4.

52 Zhang Xian 张贤, 'Haiwai chizi huige baoguo' 海外赤子 挥戈报国 [Loyal sons from the overseas fight to defend the nation], in Lu Wen, *Zhandou zai Shiwandashan*, p. 686.

53 Chen Sheng 陈生, 'Yi Ligong' 忆黎公 [In Memoriam: Li Hanwei], in Lu Wen, *Zhandou zai Shiwandashan*, p. 950; Lang Ji et al., 'Shizhi geming, jü Gong jingcui'.

54 David G. Marr, 'Creating defense capacity in Vietnam, 1945–1947', in Lawrence and Logevall, *The First Vietnam War*, p. 90.

55 Lockhart, *Nation in arms*, p. 175.

Vietnam, including close to 100 from Thái Nguyên.⁵⁶ They fought alongside the Vietnamese regiments in the Northeastern Campaign against the French forces in late 1948 and were awarded a medal by the Vietnam National Army for their contributions to that campaign.⁵⁷ During its stay in Vietnam, the regiment fought over 350 big and small battles, destroyed 30 to 40 enemy garrisons, killed over 600 enemies, and captured over 1,200 weapons. It also created a base area that covered 18 counties in the four provinces of Quảng Yên, Bắc Giang, Hải Ninh, and Khang Hải.⁵⁸

The CCP and ICP agreed that the Independent Regiment would be jointly supervised by both parties and that the regiment would participate in both the anti-French war in Vietnam and the civil war in China. It was also decided that the regiment would be solely supplied by the Vietnamese side, which promised to treat it equally as other regiments in the Vietnam National Army. However, according to Pang Zi, this promise was not fully kept.⁵⁹

The Independent Regiment was assigned both military and political duties, and its most important political task was to help the Việt Minh win over the Chinese living in northern Vietnam. The Department of Overseas Chinese Movement within the underground ICP and the Office of Overseas Chinese Affairs within the DRV government as well as their local branches were directly in charge of administering the Chinese communities in the Việt Minh-controlled areas. These party and government units managed overseas Chinese affairs through the overseas Chinese administrative committees (华侨理事会), which were mediators between the Chinese community and the Việt Minh.

In areas controlled by the Independent Regiment, its commanders soon began to get involved in conflicts between Vietnamese communist officials and overseas Chinese administrative committees regarding policies toward the Chinese. One cause of conflict was the citizenship issue. Although the DRV government had not issued any policy regarding the citizenship of the Chinese, the local Vietnamese leaders decided to follow the French practice of dividing the ethnic Chinese into Chinese citizens and local citizens. They wanted the Chinese to adopt Vietnamese citizenship, but many Chinese resisted. The commanders of the Independent Regiment supported the Chinese, arguing that the Chinese should not be forced to change their citizenship. The Vietnamese leaders wanted the Chinese farmers who had been cultivating wasteland to pay taxes to the state, but the overseas Chinese administrative committees were reluctant, because they believed that the Vietnamese government had granted a tax exemption within a certain period to those who cultivated wasteland, and again, the regiment commanders supported the overseas Chinese administrative committees. Many Chinese insisted that they should be permitted to travel to areas occupied by the French to work or to do business, and they had the support of the regiment commanders but not the Vietnamese

56 Guo Mingjin 郭明进, 'Ershi shiji zhongye jūzhu zai Yuenan de huaqiao' 二十世纪中叶居住在越南的华侨 [The overseas Chinese in Vietnam in the mid-twentieth century], in *Wenshan qiaoshi ziliao huibian*, p. 141.

57 Pang Zi, *Jiuzhi yiwang*, pp. 69–75.

58 Zhang Xian, 'Haiwai chizi huige baoguo', p. 686.

59 Pang Zi, *Jiuzhi yiwang*, p. 70.

leaders.⁶⁰ Moreover, the Vietnamese leaders did not agree that the land cultivated by the Chinese had all been wasteland since ‘The Hải Ninh people’s committee asserted that wealthy overseas Chinese had seized two-thirds of all arable land in the province, leaving little for Vietnamese, Nùng, or other ethnic groups.’⁶¹

Conflicts between the Chinese and Vietnamese revolutionaries became so intense that some local Vietnamese leaders submitted a letter to the ICP’s Central Department of Overseas Chinese Movement attacking their Chinese comrades. In the letter, the Vietnamese accused the Independent Regiment’s commanders of being ‘feudal and bourgeois nationalists’ who had no understanding of Marxism and Leninism, who had sabotaged the party’s policy of promoting solidarity between the Chinese and Vietnamese, and who therefore were not real internationalists. The regiment’s commanders responded in writing, defending themselves. These disagreements and conflicts foreshadowed similar episodes which were to take place from the 1950s to the 1970s. Over sixty years later, Pang Zi admitted that they did make some minor mistakes, such as failing to show due respect to the Vietnamese leaders, but insisted that they were correct on major issues.⁶²

These conflicts were particularly intense in Hải Ninh province, and they were even reported to the US State Department by its intelligence agents, who noticed that the Independent Regiment was only nominally controlled by the Việt Minh. According to these reports, members of the Independent Regiment conducted intensive political activities and spread CCP rather than Việt Minh propaganda among the Hakka Chinese in Hải Ninh. The regiment also collected taxes and controlled transit through the province. In late 1948, the Việt Minh had to send its own propagandists, including pro-Việt Minh Hakka revolutionaries, to Hải Ninh, and moved the Independent Regiment away to counter its expanding influence there.⁶³ Despite these measures, in May 1949, a local Việt Minh committee estimated that 75 per cent of the 150,000 Nùng and Ngái people in Hải Ninh had been under the Regiment’s influence, to the extent that the committee feared that ‘Hai Ninh may become a Chinese province’.⁶⁴ There were some grounds for suspicion: part of Hải Ninh had been Chinese territory before it was ceded to French Indochina in 1885,⁶⁵ and the Chinese were a majority in the province.⁶⁶ According to one estimate, the Nùng people or Hakka farmers made up 60 per cent of the local population, and the overseas Chinese, or urban Chinese, formed 3 per cent, the Vietnamese constituted only 13 per cent, and the rest were made up of minority groups such as the Dao (Yao) and Thai.⁶⁷ The Việt Minh leaders made other efforts to curb the

60 Ibid., pp. 75–8.

61 Marr, *Vietnam*, p. 312.

62 Pang Zi, *Jiuzhi yiwang*, pp. 75–8, 269.

63 Calkins, *China and the First Vietnam War*, p. 15.

64 Ibid., pp. 23–4. These Nùng and Ngái people in Hải Ninh mentioned here are Hakka Chinese.

65 Wu Jingyi 吴静宜, ‘Yuenan huaren qianyishi yu kejiachua de shiyong: yi Hu Zhiming shi wei li’ 越南华人迁移史与客家话的使用: 以胡志明市为例 [The migration of the Chinese in Vietnam and the use of the Hakka dialect: An analysis of Hồ Chí Minh City] (MA thesis, National Central University, 2010), p. 98.

66 For a brief history of Hải Ninh and the Nùng people in that province, see Qing Feng 清风, ‘Nongzu kao’ 侬族考 [A study of the Nùng people], *Bagui qiaoshi* 八桂侨史 3 (1996): 1–6.

67 ‘Tỉnh Hải Ninh trong kháng chiến chống Pháp: Sự tồn tại ba hệ thống chính quyền’ [The Hải Ninh

Regiment's influence in Hải Ninh. They ordered the Nùng people to join organisations controlled by the Việt Minh, stopped the activities of pro-CCP overseas Chinese organisations, and refused to grant property ownership rights to Chinese residents.⁶⁸

The Independent Regiment came to an end in June 1949. As CCP troops were preparing for their final attack on the GMD forces in Guangdong, Guangxi, and Yunnan, the Chinese and Vietnamese communists agreed that most of the Independent Regiment's fighters should return to China. The ongoing conflicts between the Independent Regiment and the Vietnamese revolutionaries might well have been another reason for relocating the regiment to China. Pang Zi and most of his comrades returned to different regions of southern China and never entered Vietnam again.⁶⁹ Pang confirmed that the disagreements between the Independent Regiment and the Vietnamese over policies toward the Chinese in Vietnam was a factor which prompted him to leave. A small number of the fighters remained in Vietnam and were reorganised into a battalion, with a Vietnamese communist as its commander and a Chinese communist as its political commissar. They fought alongside the Việt Minh till the end of the First Indochina War.

In addition, in September 1950, upon the request of the Vietnamese communists, about 150 former members of the Independent Regiment who had moved to China the previous year were sent back to work and fight in Hải Ninh. There were three governments operating in Hải Ninh at the time: the French colonial government, the Nùng Autonomous government, which was actually part of the French system, and the anti-French Việt Minh-led government. The French and pro-French Chinese were the dominant political forces in Hải Ninh, and the Vietnamese communists wanted these Chinese revolutionaries to help mobilise the Chinese in Hải Ninh. Some of these 150 Chinese later became high-ranking officials in the province, but in the late 1970s, Vietnam expelled many of them, and they ended up as refugees in China.⁷⁰

Although the Old First Regiment and the Independent Regiment were the best-known Chinese military units in northern Vietnam during the early years of the First Indochina War, they were not the only ones. In June 1945, a group of CCP members in Fangcheng, southern Guangdong, created an armed unit called the Qinzhou-Fangcheng Overseas Chinese Anti-Japanese Guerilla Brigade (钦防华侨抗日游击大队) in Naliang, near the border with Vietnam. They immediately moved the unit to the Đường Hoa region in Hải Ninh, Vietnam. The unit had about 150 fighters, who fought the Japanese and puppet troops in Vietnam for nearly two months and then moved back to China. It is interesting to note that although its leaders and soldiers were mostly Chinese from China, they chose to call themselves overseas Chinese because the leaders had planned to take the unit to Đường Hoa from the beginning, and they knew that most of the residents of Đường Hoa were

province during the War against the French: The existence of three government systems], 3 June 2013, <http://vusta.vn/chitiet/tin-tuyen-sinh-dao-tao/Tinh-Hai-Ninh-trong-khang-chien-chong-Phap-Su-ton-tai-ba-he-thong-chinh-quyen-1011>.

68 Calkins, *China and the First Vietnam War*, pp. 23–4.

69 Feng De, 'Wo suo zhidao de duli zhongtuan', p. 110.

70 Pang Zi, *Jiuzhi yiwang*, pp. 79–80; 'Tỉnh Hải Ninh trong kháng chiến chống Pháp'.

Chinese, some of whom were from Naliang. The unit re-entered Vietnam in late August 1945, only days after retreating to China, and was almost wiped out by a rival Chinese armed force.⁷¹ It was a rare scene of two Chinese armed units fighting against each other on Vietnamese soil. In late October 1945, the Fangcheng branch of the CCP recreated its armed wing and named it the Fangcheng Guerilla Brigade (防城游击大队), which had about 150 fighters. Several months later, the brigade was reorganised and moved to Vietnam as a battalion of the Old First Regiment. A local CCP leader proudly recalled that the CCP armed units of Fangcheng made at least three entries into Vietnam during the First Indochina War.⁷² Zhou Nan and Zhuang Tian, the two highest-ranking CCP leaders who had worked in Vietnam before 1950, were dispatched to the region between Guangxi and Yunnan to command a liberated area there. The armed wing of the liberated area was the Guangxi-Yunnan Borderland Column (桂滇边纵队), and there would have been members of the Old First Regiment and the Independent Regiment in the column. In May 1948, this column had to retreat to Vietnam to escape from Nationalist troops. In August 1948, while stationed in Hà Giang, the column was joined by another communist armed unit from Yunnan, which was under the command of the famous Yunnanese communist Zhu Jiabi.⁷³ The New First Regiment, which was created in southern Guangdong after the departure of the Old First Regiment, also entered Vietnam in November 1948 to take a respite. The regiment later moved to Yunnan.⁷⁴ In March 1949, fighters from two CCP regiments based in southern Guangdong disguised themselves as Vietnamese guerillas and attacked the French garrison in Móng Cái, located right next to the Sino-Vietnamese border. They killed more than 50 of the French troops, took over 100 captives, and also captured a large number of high quality weapons.⁷⁵

71 Shen Yaoxun, 'Cong Naliang qiyi dao Xinjie shibian', pp. 104–7; Chen Sheng 陈生, 'Canjia Naliang kangri wuzhuang qiyi de huiyi' 参加那良抗日武装起义的回忆 [My memory of my participation in the Anti-Japanese armed uprising of Naliang], in Lu Wen, *Zhandou zai Shiwandashan*, pp. 128–37.

72 Peng Yang 彭扬, 'Yehuo shaobujin chunfeng chuiyousheng: Huiyi chongjian Fangcheng renmin wuzhuang jingguo' 野火烧不尽 春风吹又生: 回忆重建防城人民武装经过 [The spring wind will bring burned grass back to life: Recalling the re-creation of the People's Armed Force of Fangcheng], in Lu Wen, *Zhandou zai Shiwandashan*, pp. 157–71; Chen Sheng 陈生, 'Dongshan zaiqi yinianjian: Yi Dongshan youjidui de zhandou licheng' 东山再起一年间: 忆东山游击队的战斗历程 [To rise again within one year: The course of struggle of the Dongshan guerillas], in *ibid.*, p. 214.

73 Jiayi Gao, 'Fighting side by side', pp. 128–9; Wu Jilin 吴基林, Fang Shan 方山, *Guidianqianbian zongduishi* 桂滇黔边纵队史 [A history of the Guangxi-Yunnan-Guizhou Borderland Column] (Guangzhou: Guangdong renmin, 1993), p. 56.

74 Xie Wanggang 谢王岗, 'Jueding mingyun de bodou: 1948 nian Shiwandashan de fanweijiao douzheng' 决定命运的搏斗: 1948年十万大山的反围剿斗争 [A fight that determines destiny: The anti-extermination struggle in the Shiwan Great Mountains in 1948], in Lu Wen, *Zhandou zai Shiwandashan*, p. 434; Li Chao 李超, 'Huiyi Shiwandashan de douzheng' 回忆十万大山的斗争 [Recalling the struggles in the Shiwan Great Mountains], in *ibid.*, pp. 449–50.

75 Li Chao, 'Huiyi Shiwandashan de douzheng', pp. 458–9; Li Hanwei 黎汉威, 'Qixi Mangjie' 奇袭芒街 [A surprise attack on Móng Cái], in Lu Wen, *Zhandou zai Shiwandashan*, pp. 602–6; Feng Junsong 冯军松, 'Huiyi xiji Mangjie Fajun xinbingying de jingguo' 回忆袭击芒街法军新兵营的经过 [Recalling our attack on the camp of the newly recruited French troops in Móng Cái], in *ibid.*, pp. 607–14; Ye Zhaowen 叶兆文, 'Zhandou zai huxue li' 战斗在虎穴里 [Fighting in the tiger's den], in *ibid.*, pp. 615–25.

In general, both the CCP and the underground ICP were supportive of the cross-border actions of the armed units under their sole or joint control. In late 1948 or early 1949, Fang Fang, an important leader of the CCP's Southern China branch, reached an agreement with an ICP delegate in Hong Kong, according to which if a CCP unit moved to Vietnam to conduct joint actions with an ICP unit, then the CCP side would nominate the commander and the ICP side the political commissar of the joint force. If an ICP unit moved to China, then the commander of the joint force would be an ICP choice, and the political commissar would be a CCP member.⁷⁶ The CCP-ICP cross-border collaboration prompted the French command in the region to form a short-lived alliance with the Chinese Nationalist forces in Guangxi,⁷⁷ thus creating a hot local theatre of the emerging international Cold War.

While quite a few armed units followed the path of the Old First Regiment — that is, they were created in China and then fought in both countries — there were also Chinese armed groups that were more similar to the Independent Regiment, which means they were formed in Vietnam and then fought in both Vietnam and China. In Bắc Giang, the Overseas Chinese Volunteers Armed Unit (华侨武装志愿队) was active from early 1946 to October 1947. This unit was jointly organised by the CCP and ICP, and it started out as a small band of 22 people but later grew into an armed force of over 100 fighters. Most of those fighters moved to China in late 1947.⁷⁸ The Chinese miners in the Hồng Quảng district also organised a guerilla unit, which had over 20 fighters in late 1948.⁷⁹ In 1949, some CCP members created the Hải Ninh Overseas Chinese Anti-violence Self-defence Unit (海宁华侨抗暴自卫队) to fight against the French forces who were taking revenge for the CCP's March attack on the Móng Cái garrisons.⁸⁰

In addition to military units, there were also many active Chinese mass organisations in the Việt Minh areas. In Thái Nguyên province, where many Việt Minh leaders and organs were based during the war, there were six overseas Chinese mass organisations, including the:

- Thái Nguyên Division of the Vietnam Branch of the Southeast Asian Overseas Chinese Association (越南南洋华侨协会太原分会),
- Chinese Association of Thái Nguyên Province (太原省中华会馆),
- Study Society of the Overseas Chinese Democratic Youths of Thái Nguyên Province (太原省华侨民主青年进修社),
- Overseas Chinese Women's Association of Thái Nguyên Province (太原省华侨妇女会),

76 Li Chao 李超, 'Zhongyue bianjing hebing shangtan de jingguo' 中越边境合兵商谈的经过 [The conclusion of the Agreement regarding the formation of Joint Forces in the Sino-Vietnamese border region], in Lu Wen, *Zhandou zai Shiwandashan*, pp. 626–7.

77 Dalloz, *The war in Indo-china*, p. 113.

78 Guo Mingjin, 'Ershi shiji zhongye jüzhu zai Yuenan de huaqiao', p. 143.

79 Lin Hai 林海, 'Xiang geming laoqianbei xuexi: huaqiao chengji zhanlanhui ceji' 向革命老前辈学习: 华侨成绩展览会侧记 [Learn from the elder revolutionaries: A report on the Exhibition of the achievements of the overseas Chinese], *Xin Yue hua bao* 新越华报, 1 Aug. 1963.

80 Huang Jian 黄坚, 'Zhanma you sifeng: Matoushan gongzuo de huiyi' 战马犹嘶风: 马头山工作的回忆 [The warhorses neighed against the wind: Recalling our work in the Matoushan area], in *Zhandou zai Shiwandashan*, p. 599.

- New Democracy League (新民主主义同志会), and
- Thái Nguyên Branch of the Wartime Relief Association of the Overseas Chinese in Vietnam (越南战时华侨筹赈会太原分会).

All these organisations were created between late 1945 and early 1947, and controlled by Chinese communists. In fact, all six organisations in Thái Nguyên were led by the same couple, Guo Han and Liang Fang, who married in the province in late 1945. Guo was born in Kunming and was taken to Thái Nguyên when he was a teenager. He joined the revolutionary movement in early 1946 and became a CCP member in early 1947. Liang was born in Hà Nội and joined the CCP in 1949.⁸¹

Wu Qimei and the Central Bureau of Political Security

In late 1945, as mentioned, Pang Zi was able to get in touch with high-ranking Vietnamese communist leaders largely thanks to his former classmate Zhao Shiyao and Zhao's former classmate Wu Qimei. However, Wu and Zhao did not join Pang Zi when the latter moved to the northeastern district to create the Overseas Chinese Self-Defence Regiment. Pang Zi decided to go to work in remote areas partly because he felt that he was not needed by the party centre. Wu Qimei could not leave the party centre, because he had close relationships with the ICP's leaders and his services were much needed. Zhao Shiyao was not as powerful as Wu Qimei in the Vietnamese communist system, and he decided to stay with Wu Qimei possibly because he had been relying on Wu ever since he moved to Vietnam.

Wu Qimei was born in 1912 in Vietnam. His family originally came from Guangdong and he grew up in Hạ Côi, Hải Ninh, which had a large community of Hakka-speaking Chinese.⁸² He was sent to China for education and became a classmate of Zhao Shiyao when attending a middle school in Guangdong. Wu even attended a university in Shanghai.⁸³ In 1932 and 1933, he became a leader of a group of Chinese progressive activists in Hải Phòng.⁸⁴ It is not clear whether or not this group was part of the CCP, although some of its members later went to Yan'an, the Party's wartime capital. Wu joined the ICP in 1937. He ran a bookstore in Hải Phòng at that time, and also served as a part-time teacher in some Chinese schools in Hải Phòng. In 1940, he was arrested by the French colonial authorities and imprisoned in Sơn La.⁸⁵ It is believed that it was during his imprisonment

81 Guo Mingjin, 'Ershi shiji zhongye jūzhu zai Yuenan de huaqiao', pp. 87–8, 140; Liang Fang 梁芳, 'Wo yisheng nanwang de jijianshi' 我一生难忘的几件事 [Some unforgettable events in my life], in *Wenshan qiaoshi ziliao huibian*, p. 130.

82 Personal communication with Wu Qimei's nephew, 17 Aug. 2019.

83 Zhang Yu, *Yuenan Jianpuzhai Laowo huaqiao huaren manji*, p. 292.

84 Li Bailun 李白仑, 'Zhi Yuegong zuzhibu ganbuguanlisi de xin' 致越共组织部干部管理司的信 [A letter to the Department of Personnel Management of the Ministry of Organisation of the Vietnamese Communist Party], in Pang Zi, *Jiuzhi yiwang*, p. 379.

85 Li Jian (Lê Giản) 黎简, 'Yuan Yuenan gonganbu buzhang Li Jian zhi Yuenan laodongdang zhongyang de xin' 原越南公安部部长黎简致越南劳动党中央的信 [A letter from former Minister of Public Security of Vietnam Lê Giản to the Central Committee of the Vietnamese Workers' Party] (14 May 1991), in Pang Zi, *Jiuzhi yiwang*, pp. 371–2; Zhang Yu, *Yuenan Jianpuzhai Laowo huaqiao huaren manji*, p. 292.

there that he got to meet Hồ Chí Minh. He became Hồ Chí Minh's political secretary after he was released from prison.⁸⁶ This account is problematic because Hồ Chí Minh was not imprisoned in the same place at the same time.⁸⁷ According to a more reliable source, Wu Qimei was sent to China to work with the senior Vietnamese communist Hoàng Quốc Việt after his imprisonment.⁸⁸ It is more likely that it was during his stay in China in the early 1940s that he got to know Hồ Chí Minh, since Hồ was also in China at that time. Another possibility is that he got to know some high-ranking Vietnamese communists during his imprisonment, and some of these people introduced him to Hồ Chí Minh after their release. There was a large group of Vietnamese communists who were detained in the French prison in Sơn La, including Lê Đức Thọ.⁸⁹ As Hồ Chí Minh's secretary, Wu would have had opportunities to meet other high-ranking Vietnamese communist leaders, including Lê Đức Thọ, to whom Pang Zi was introduced by Wu in late 1945.

It was about the same time when Wu Qimei arranged the meeting between Lê Đức Thọ and Pang Zi that Thọ gave Wu a special assignment. In late October or early November of 1945, Lê Đức Thọ told Lê Giản, head of the DRV's Ministry of Public Security, that he wanted to send a group of Chinese comrades to work with Lê Giản, emphasising that they were all well-educated people who had good political understanding. Lê Giản was pleased to learn that one of these Chinese comrades was his old friend Wu Qimei. The two had worked together in Hải Phòng as revolutionaries in the late 1930s but lost contact with each other because they were both arrested by the French in 1940 and sent to different prisons. It turned out that Lê Đức Thọ wanted Wu Qimei and his team to work as secret agents who would spy on the Chinese Nationalists who had been stationed in northern Vietnam since shortly after the Japanese surrender. Lê Đức Thọ affirmed that the agents' identities would be kept secret, and their expenses would be covered by a secret budget. The group would report to Lê Giản only. Lê Giản had the responsibility of checking their reports and sending the important ones to Võ Nguyên Giáp and Lê Đức Thọ. Lê Giản confirmed that some of these reports were quite useful.⁹⁰

Wu Qimei was appointed leader of this group, which Lê Giản simply describes as the 'Mei Group' or the 'special work team', but its official name was changed to 'the Central Bureau of Political Security of Vietnam' in early 1947. In late 1946, after the GMD's withdrawal from Vietnam and the outbreak of war, the leaders of the ICP and DRV all relocated to the northernmost part of the country. The Ministry of Public Security moved to the city of Tuyên Quang, and the Mei Group moved there too. The party leaders now decided to send Wu Qimei and his group to central and southern Vietnam to assist the revolutionaries in French-occupied areas. The leaders

86 Zhang Yu, *Yuenan Jianpuzhai Laowo huaqiao huaren manji*, p. 292.

87 Wu's nephew confirmed that Wu did serve as Hồ Chí Minh's secretary but was not sure whether or not the two had been imprisoned together. Personal communication, 18 Aug. 2019.

88 Li Jian (Lê Giản), 'Yuan Yuenan gonganbu buzhang Li Jian zhi Yuenan laodongdang zhongyang de xin', p. 372.

89 Marr, *Vietnam*, pp. 488–9.

90 *Ibid.*, pp. 370–71.

believed that it was easier for the Chinese revolutionaries to travel to those places because the French treated the Chinese more leniently than they did the Vietnamese.

Partly because of this new assignment, Wu Qimei expanded his group by bringing in his friends and relatives, including his old friend Zhao Shiyao, Zhao's friend Guo Fang, who was also a friend of Pang Zi, Wu Jingye, a senior communist intellectual from China, Hong Zongju, another long-time friend of Wu Qimei, and Wu Nansheng, a former GMD agent who had been persuaded by Wu to leave the GMD and to work for the communists. In mid-1947, Cheng Minde, another old friend of Wu Qimei, also joined the group. Within this group, Wu Qimei and Cheng Minde were members of the ICP, Zhao Shiyao, Guo Fang, and Wu Jingye were members of the CCP, Hong Zongju was a progressive intellectual, and Wu Nansheng claimed to have been a leading member of the Malayan Communist Party before working for the GMD.⁹¹

The group's expansion and complex composition would prove to be its downfall. About two months after Cheng Minde's arrival, Lê Đức Thọ told Lê Giản that he had been informed that Cheng had been a GMD agent working in the Sino-Vietnamese border area. Cheng had been working as an editor for Ly Ban, a senior Vietnamese communist who had spent a long time in China, but was forced to resign when Ly Ban discovered his former connection with the GMD.⁹² Lê Giản and Wu Qimei took Cheng into the group because both of them had known Cheng for a long time and also because Cheng told them that he had decided to leave Ly Ban due to some disagreements with his fellow editors. Very likely Wu and Giản did not have a chance to check with Ly Ban about Cheng Minde. Lê Đức Thọ was also suspicious of Wu Nansheng, calling him an agent of Chiang Kai-shek, and warned Lê Giản to keep a close eye on Wu Qimei's group. Lê Giản told Lê Đức Thọ that he had already assigned a senior Vietnamese communist to live with Wu Qimei and another Vietnamese agent to observe their activities from the outside, but the two Vietnamese agents had failed to discover anything unusual partly because of the language barrier — neither of them could understand Cantonese. Lê Giản then assured his boss that he did not believe Cheng Minde was a GMD agent, and Lê Đức Thọ was not happy to hear that.⁹³

In late 1947, right before the French launched an all-out attack on the Vietnamese communist base area in Tuyên Quang and Thái Nguyên, Lê Giản received three documents from high-ranking party leaders affirming that Wu Qimei and Cheng Minde were both Chiang Kai-shek's agents. Both allegedly had close contacts with leading GMD agents in the Dongxing-Hải Ninh area before the outbreak of the Anti-Japanese War in 1937. Some of these documents even carried the signature of Trường Chinh, the ICP's secretary general. Lê Giản now had to take the matter seriously for three reasons: first, the new round of accusations was

91 Li Jian (Lê Giản), 'Yuan Yuenan gonganbu buzhang Li Jian zhi Yuenan laodongdang zhongyang de xin', p. 371; Zhang Yu, *Yuenan Jianpuzhai Laowo huaqiao huaren manji*, pp. 291–2.

92 For Ly Ban's connections with China, see Lai Chen, 'Yuegong dangyuan Ly Ban zai Min-Yue-Gan bian', pp. 62–6; Li Xinhua and Li Nianyun, 'Cengwei Zhonggong dangyuan de Yuenan buzhang', pp. 118–25.

93 Li Jian (Lê Giản), 'Yuan Yuenan gonganbu buzhang Li Jian zhi Yuenan laodongdang zhongyang de xin', pp. 372–3.

endorsed by more party leaders; second, Wu Qimei himself became a target of accusations; and third, the ICP affirmed in a resolution issued in 1947 that

although we respect the lives and properties of the overseas Chinese, we must distinguish the overseas Chinese from those bandits and running dogs of the French that have to be punished [...] When recruiting Chinese cadres for mobilising the overseas Chinese, we must make sure that we do not allow the counterrevolutionaries to use this opportunity to penetrate into our movement.⁹⁴

Lê Giản then rushed to Tuyên Quang to investigate the case. After spending two days talking with Wu Qimei and his people as well as the Vietnamese cadres who had had close contact with the group, Lê Giản concluded that the accusations against Wu Qimei and his people were unfounded. Instead, he became suspicious of those who had made accusations against them.⁹⁵

Pang Zi reports that in 1955, Trường Chinh told some Chinese officials that the accusations against Wu Qimei's group were made by two Chinese communists, Guo Zhaohua and Guo Fang, and at least one of them, Guo Fang, was actually a member of Wu's group. Zhao Shiyao, Pang Zi, and Guo Fang had been close friends back in China, and it was Zhao Shiyao who brought both Pang Zi and Guo Fang into the CCP in 1938. In his old age, Pang Zi still could not understand why Guo Fang would submit all those false reports to the Vietnamese communist leaders to accuse his comrades, including Zhao Shiyao. It was the accusations from Guo Fang and Guo Zhaohua, combined with the French attack on the base area, which convinced some Vietnamese leaders that traitors within their ranks might have provided intelligence to the French and that those traitors were none other than Wu Qimei and his group.⁹⁶ Considering the report from Ly Ban about Cheng Minde mentioned above, it appears that there were accusations from different directions against Wu Qimei and his group.

There is evidence showing that Wu Qimei did have connections with the GMD. In 1939, he recommended a young Chinese from northern Vietnam to work for the Bureau of Investigation and Statistics of the Military Council of Chiang Kai-shek's government, which was one of the most powerful secret agencies within the GMD system. However, this does not mean that Wu was a GMD agent. There were many communists hiding within the GMD system at that time, and Wu could have been one of them. The young Chinese he recommended to the Nationalists was actually a communist revolutionary.⁹⁷ During the war against Japan, Hồ Chí Minh and some other Vietnamese communists also collaborated with the Chinese nationalists. It is believed that it was to hide his identity as a communist so that he could better cooperate with the Chinese Nationalists, particularly General Zhang Fakui, that Nguyễn Ái Quốc changed his name to Hồ Chí Minh in the early 1940s.⁹⁸ Immediately after the Japanese surrender, the Vietnamese communists developed a rather close relationship with some GMD members, purchasing a large

94 Zhuang Yong, 'Yuenan huaqiao yongshi mingji Huzhuxi de enqing', *Xin Yue hua bao*, 7 Nov. 1969.

95 Li Jian (Lê Giản), 'Yuan Yuenan gonganbu buzhang Li Jian zhi Yuenan laodongdang zhongyang de xin', pp. 373–4.

96 Pang Zi, *Jiuzhi yiwang*, pp. 359–60.

97 Liao Yuan, *Chunfeng qiuyu*, pp. 60, 63A.

98 Dalloz, *The war in Indo-china, 1945–54*, p. 47.

quantity of weapons, as well as communications equipment, uniforms, printing presses, and paper from them.⁹⁹ The Chinese Nationalist forces that occupied northern Vietnam contributed greatly to the August Revolution led by the Việt Minh, with Hồ Chí Minh and his followers working quite well with Lu Han and other Chinese Nationalist commanders.¹⁰⁰ It was because of such cooperation that the Chinese Nationalists 'gave the DRV five valuable months of de facto protection from serious French attack north of the sixteenth parallel'.¹⁰¹ Hence it was very unfair for the Vietnamese communists to have accused Wu Qimei of having contact with the GMD. Indeed, the assignment Wu Qimei had received from the party leaders was to gather intelligence about the GMD troops in Vietnam, and it would have been difficult to do this without having connections and communications with the GMD.

It was unfortunate for Wu Qimei and his group that Lê Giản's trust in them failed to save them. After the French launched their land, sea, and air attack on the central base area in late 1947, Lê Giản had to leave Tuyên Quang to take charge of the security of the top leaders, including Hồ Chí Minh.¹⁰² He asked his subordinate, head of the Tuyên Quang Provincial Bureau of Public Security, to oversee Wu Qimei's group. When he returned to Tuyên Quang about a month later, he received the shocking news that most members of the group, including Wu himself, had been 'liquidated' in October 1947, and all the written material about the group had been destroyed. He was told that the brutal order had been given by Lê Đức Thọ, who believed that Wu Qimei and his people were indeed Chiang Kai-shek's agents and that they could cause severe harm to the party if the French were to lay their hands on them.¹⁰³ Wu Qimei and the other victims were killed by Tuyên Quang and Thái Nguyên public security officers.¹⁰⁴

At least twenty people were 'liquidated', including Wu Qimei and his cousin Wu Qiyang, along with Wu Jingye, Cheng Minde, Hong Zongju, and several women. Only a few members of the group managed to survive. One of the accusers, Guo Fang, was not killed, and the other accuser, Guo Zhaohua (if he was a member), also survived. CCP member Zhao Shiyao managed to escape, as did the former GMD agent Wu Nansheng. Most of those who survived the liquidation later returned to China and died in imprisonment imposed by the CCP, and they were imprisoned in China mainly because of the crime they had supposedly committed in Vietnam.¹⁰⁵ This indicates that Wu Qimei and his teammates were killed mainly for political reasons. At the moment when they were purged, they were suspected of being agents not only for the GMD, but also for the French, because once the Cold War started, the GMD

99 Ibid., p. 57; Lockhart, *Nation in arms*, p. 179; Tucker, *Vietnam*, p. 51.

100 Worthing, *Occupation and revolution*, pp. 4, 44–5, 73–6, 101–12; Lin Hua, 'The Chinese occupation of Northern Vietnam, 1945–1946: A reappraisal', p. 147.

101 Marr, *Vietnam*, p. 172.

102 The French launched Operation Léa on 7 Oct. 1947 to capture Hồ Chí Minh and other Việt Minh leaders and to destroy their main battle units. This was followed by Operation Ceinture, which started on 20 Nov. 1947 and was designed to crush Việt Minh forces in a quadrangle northwest of Hà Nội. Tucker, *Vietnam*, p. 55.

103 Li Jian (Lê Giản), 'Yuan Yuenan gonganbu buzhang Li Jian zhi Yuenan laodongdang zhongyang de xin', pp. 374–5.

104 Li Bailun, 'Zhi Yuegong zuzhibu ganbuguanlisi de xin', p. 379.

105 Zhang Yu, *Yuenan Jianpuzhai Laowo huaqiao huaren manji*, p. 294.

and the French were perceived to be allies. Their ethnic identity was a secondary factor behind their tragic deaths. It was mainly because they were Chinese that they were chosen to work as secret agents to spy on the GMD, and it was also because they were Chinese that they were later suspected of being secret agents for the GMD and the French.

For a long time, the CCP seemed to simply accept the accusations against Wu Qimei's group made by their Vietnamese comrades, and that led to the imprisonment of Zhao Shiyao and some other members of the group who were lucky enough to survive the purge. In the early 1950s, the Guangdong Bureau of Public Security sent a group of officials to Vietnam to investigate the case of Wu Qimei's team, particularly the case of Zhao Shiyao, and the group got to meet and talk with Trường Chinh, Ly Ban, Lê Giản, and others. The Vietnamese leaders confirmed that the accusations against the group were initially made by other Chinese revolutionaries, implying that it was not their fault that Wu Qimei and his subordinates were executed. The investigation did not cause the Chinese side to change their verdict against Zhao Shiyao.¹⁰⁶

Among the victims of the purge, if Wu Qimei was the most prominent ICP member, then Wu Jingye was the most influential member of the CCP. Born in Guangdong in 1911, Wu Jingye moved to Singapore with his parents as a child, because his grandfather had made a fortune there. In 1930, he joined the CCP while in Malaya and was involved in revolutionary activities in Malaya, Guangdong, Hong Kong, Thailand, Burma, and southern Vietnam. In 1938, he became the editor-in-chief of a Chinese-language newspaper based in southern Vietnam. In 1943, while in Shaoguan, Guangdong, he lost contact with the CCP. He arrived in Hà Nội from Kunming in August 1946 and established contact with the CCP organisation in northern Vietnam. Later that year, he joined Wu Qimei's group.¹⁰⁷

In the decades following the 'liquidation' of Wu Qimei's group, the two parties revisited the case several times, and most of the victims have been gradually rehabilitated by both parties. It is believed that Lê Đức Thọ did not inform Hồ Chí Minh or get his approval before issuing the order to purge Wu Qimei's group. After Hồ Chí Minh learned about the killings, he tried to console the relatives of the victims and also ordered the local governments to take care of their relatives. Meanwhile, he did not make it explicit that he believed that the victims were innocent and that he did not approve Lê Đức Thọ's decision.¹⁰⁸ In 1961, the Tuyên Quang Provincial Public Security Bureau issued a certificate to Wu Qimei's children, confirming that their father was 'missing in action' in October 1947. In 1981, with the approval of Prime Minister Phạm Văn Đồng, the Vietnamese government finally

106 Lê Giản believes that the visit of the Guangdong public security officials took place in 1951 or 1952, but another source confirms that it happened in 1955. It's also possible that there were two visits. Pang Zi, *Jiuzhi yiwang*, pp. 356, 359, 376.

107 Wu Fengyuan 吴逢源, 'Chizi fengfan: Huainian wo de fuqin Wu Jingye' 赤子风范: 怀念我的父亲吴敬业 [A person with a pure heart: In memoriam of my father Wu Jingye], in *Wenshan qiaoshi ziliao huibian*, pp. 71–5; Wu Jingye de yisheng bianxiezu 吴敬业的一生编写组, comp., *Wu Jingye de yisheng* 吴敬业的一生 [The life of Wu Jingye] (Guangzhou: Zhonggong Guangdong shengwei dangshi yanjiuhui, 1990), pp. 1–56.

108 Zhang Yu, *Yuenan Jianpuzhai Laowo huaqiao huaren manji*, p. 299.

recognised Wu Qimei as a ‘martyr’, and later also erected a tomb for him in the Tuyên Quang Provincial Cemetery for Revolutionary Martyrs, although it is not clear whether or not Wu Qimei’s remains were buried there. It is interesting to note that this belated political rehabilitation came at a time when the Vietnamese and Chinese communists were fighting a bloody war against each other in the same border region that Wu Qimei once conducted his revolutionary activities.

Whereas the Vietnamese side focused its attention on Wu Qimei, the Chinese side showed much more concern about Wu Jingye and Zhao Shiyao. After Wu Jingye’s death, his wife returned to China and worked in Yunnan till 1980, when she retired and moved to her birthplace, Hong Kong. She suffered much persecution at the hands of the CCP because of the suspicions placed on Wu Jingye. In 1985, Wu Jingye was finally rehabilitated by the Yunnan Provincial Committee of the CCP, and five years later, a book was published to commemorate him.¹⁰⁹ Zhao Shiyao was also posthumously rehabilitated in the 1980s.

Rong Zhaolin and the Hải Phòng Overseas Chinese New Democracy Union of Vietnam

Whereas both the Independent Regiment and the Central Bureau of Political Security were based in rural regions controlled at least partially by the Việt Minh, there were also ethnic Chinese revolutionary organisations operating in urban areas ruled by the French. One such organisation was the Hải Phòng Overseas Chinese New Democracy Union of Vietnam (越南海防华侨新民主主义联合会), and one of its key leaders was a Chinese revolutionary named Rong Zhaolin.

Rong Zhaolin was born in Cao Bằng, northern Vietnam, in 1913, to a Chinese family that had been living there for three generations. The family originally came from Nanhai county in Guangdong province, China. Rong attended elementary schools first in Cao Bằng and then in the town of Pingmeng in Zhenbian county, Guangxi, which is adjacent to Cao Bằng.¹¹⁰ At the age of 15 he was admitted to the Number Seven Middle School of Guangxi in Longzhou. It was during his time in Longzhou that he got to closely observe the Longzhou Uprising launched by the CCP in 1929. After the Japanese occupation of Manchuria in 1931, Rong and a group of friends left Guangxi for Guangzhou, where they attended several schools, including Sun Yat-sen University. In Guangzhou, he met friends who were CCP members. He became a member of the Chinese Communist Youth League in 1935, and joined the CCP a year later.¹¹¹

After the Japanese occupied the coastal areas of Guangdong in 1938, Rong and some of his comrades moved to northern Guangdong to conduct anti-Japanese activities. One year later, the CCP leadership in northern Guangdong dispatched

109 Wu Fengyuan, ‘Chizi fengfan’, pp. 77–8.

110 The name of the county was changed from ‘Zhenbian’ (Pacifying the frontier) to ‘Mubian’ (Harmonising the frontier) in 1953, and again to ‘Napo’ in 1965.

111 Zhonggong Napo xianwei dangshi bangongshi 中共那坡县委党史办公室, ed., *Fengfengyuyuy qishinian: Rong Zhaolin jinian wenji* 风风雨雨七十年: 容兆麟纪念文集 [Seventy years of ups and downs: Collected essays commemorating Rong Zhaolin] (Beijing: Renmin ribao she, 2006), pp. 3–6; One of Rong’s communist friends during that period was a young woman named Hu Ming, who later moved to Yan’an and married Bo Yibo, a senior CCP leader.

Rong and two other communists to Pingmeng, Guangxi, to hide within the GMD forces stationed there. Unable to maintain regular communications with their superiors in Guangdong, the small number of communists in Pingmeng decided to focus on educating and mobilising the youths in the Sino–Vietnamese border region. Rong and his wife Li Duansheng, also a communist, returned to Cao Bằng to teach in a local school, but they maintained close contact with their comrades in Pingmeng. Soon Cao Bằng was also occupied by the Japanese and the couple had to move to Guangxi and Yunnan, and they did not return to Vietnam until after the Japanese surrender in 1945. By that time, they had lost contact with the CCP, although they still considered themselves CCP members and tried to promote the CCP agenda wherever they were.¹¹²

They moved to live in Hà Nội not long after returning to Vietnam, and one of their friends, who was also a CCP member, was in Hà Nội as well. The three formed a cell and they decided to promote revolution among the Chinese living in Vietnam. Soon that friend decided to return to China, and Rong Zhaolin moved to Hải Phòng to serve as the editor of a Chinese-language journal. In early 1948, he was introduced to Yang Shijie, a Chinese ICP member. Yang had been instructed by ICP's Hải Phòng branch to create an underground ethnic Chinese organisation, which would work directly under the Party's municipal committee to enforce its policies regarding the Chinese, with the aim of mobilising and organising their support for the anti-French war. There were active underground CCP agents and organisations in Hà Nội and Hải Phòng at the time, but Rong seemed to have had no contact with them. Instead, he developed close contacts with the ICP through Yang Shijie, and assisted Yang in creating the underground organisation, which was named the Hải Phòng Overseas Chinese New Democracy Union of Vietnam. Yang and the other leaders assigned Rong to draft the organisation's programme and founding declaration.¹¹³

According to Rong Zhaolin, the programme stated that the New Democracy Union would 'take Marxism, Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought as its guiding principles' and would 'use these principles to educate its members'. It would 'spread revolutionary truth among the overseas Chinese, to support and participate in the righteous anti-French war of Vietnam, and expose the aggressive acts of the French colonialists and traitorous behaviour of their running-dogs'. Furthermore, it stated that the union 'supports the Chinese revolution led by the CCP'. Rong recalled that

112 Zhonggong Napo xianwei dangshi bangongshi, *Fengfengyuyu qishinian*, pp. 8–21; According to the official history of the Napo branch, Rong and his comrades arrived in Napo in early 1941 rather than 1939. They created the first CCP cell in this frontier county, and they lost contact with their superiors in northern Guangdong in May 1942; Zhonggong Napo xianwei zuzhibu 中共那坡县委组织部, Zhonggong Napo xianwei dangshiban 中共那坡县委党史办, Napoxian danganju 那坡县档案局, eds., *Zhongguo gongchandang Guangxi Zhuangzu zizhiqiu Napoxian zuzhishi ziliao* 中国共产党广西壮族自治区那坡县组织史资料 [Material about the History of the CCP Organisation in Napo County of Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region] (Nanning: Guangxi renmin, 1996), pp. 11, 13.

113 Zhonggong Napo xianwei dangshi bangongshi, *Fengfengyuyu qishinian*, pp. 20–23; Chen Dong 陈东, 'Yi Dongmang' 忆东芒 [Recalling my activities in Dongmang], in *Zhandou zai Shiwandashan*, pp. 812–20; Lu Ping 卢平, 'Zai Haifang gongzuo de huiyi' 在海防工作的回忆 [Recalling my work in Hải Phòng], in *ibid.*, pp. 936–40; Chen Hong 陈虹, 'Haifang tuoxian ji' 海防脱险记 [Escaping from Danger in Hải Phòng], in *ibid.*, pp. 941–9.

in drafting this document he consulted the Chinese New Democracy Youth League's programme, but also took into consideration the special conditions in Vietnam.¹¹⁴

Yang Shijie was the leader of the New Democracy Union, and Rong was put in charge of its division of culture and education. Among his colleagues in the division were the principal and some teachers from the Overseas Chinese Middle School of Hải Phòng. Members of the union included teachers, students, factory workers, owners and employees of businesses, and office workers. There were different divisions that served different groups of people. The union published a news bulletin to disseminate among its members reports from the Xinhua News Agency and the Việt Minh News Agency. It also published some other magazines, and the aim of the propaganda was to call on the Chinese in Vietnam to offer their support to both the Việt Minh and the CCP.

Rong Zhaolin became the head of the Hải Phòng Overseas Chinese New Democracy Union of Vietnam in late 1951 when most of the other leaders had to leave Hải Phòng to escape from French soldiers. In late 1952, Rong and several other leaders were arrested by the French. The head of the women's division, Gao Ying, an eighteen-year-old Chinese woman born in Hà Cối of Hải Ninh, was killed by the French and was later recognised as a revolutionary martyr by the Vietnamese government.¹¹⁵ She was possibly the most famous member of the Hải Phòng Overseas Chinese New Democracy Union of Vietnam. Rong and the others were eventually taken to the notorious French prison on Phú Quốc Island in southern Vietnam, where they got to meet many ethnic Vietnamese revolutionaries who were their fellow inmates. They were not released until after the signing of the Geneva Accord in 1954, when DRV traded some French prisoners of war for these imprisoned revolutionaries. Rong then returned to northern Vietnam to run the training centre for the youths of the New Democracy Union based in Hải Dương.¹¹⁶

The Việt Minh took over Hải Phòng from the French in May 1955, and the New Democracy Union was dissolved by the authorities not long after that. Rong Zhaolin continued to live and work in Vietnam as an official. In 1970, he was arrested and imprisoned for unknown reasons. He was released in 1977 and in May 1978, his entire family relocated from Vietnam to China. Back in China, he was initially resettled on a state farm in Guangxi and later moved to Nanning, the provincial capital, where he died in 2002.¹¹⁷ He was offered a position in the local government mainly because he managed to prove that he had been a CCP member since 1938. A number of other former members of the New Democracy Union had also moved to China by the late 1970s.

Chen Huaquan, one of Rong Zhaolin's followers, who was a member of the Hải Phòng Overseas Chinese New Democracy Union of Vietnam and was imprisoned on Phú Quốc along with Rong, believed that the Hải Phòng Overseas Chinese New Democracy Union of Vietnam was a branch of the Overseas Chinese New

114 Zhonggong Napo xianwei dangshi bangongshi, *Fengfengyuyu qishinian*, pp. 23–4.

115 Wang Keming 王克明, 'Geming lieshi haoqi changcun: Mianhuai Gao Ying lieshi' 革命烈士浩气长存: 缅怀高瑛烈士 [The noble spirit of the revolutionary martyr will live forever: In memoriam of Martyr Gao Ying], *Zhencang wangluo* 珍藏网络, 17 Mar. 2011.

116 Zhonggong Napo xianwei dangshi bangongshi, *Fengfengyuyu qishinian*, pp. 26–8.

117 *Ibid.*, pp. 28–9.

Democracy Union of Vietnam (越南华侨新民主主义联合会), which also had branches in the other two major cities in northern Vietnam, namely, Hà Nội and Nam Dinh.¹¹⁸ Another former member of the Hải Phòng Overseas Chinese New Democracy Union of Vietnam confirmed that the headquarters of the Overseas Chinese New Democracy Union of Vietnam was located in the liberated area and that the martyred Gao Ying had attended a training programme there in 1951.¹¹⁹

Conclusion

As stated at the outset of this article, the Chinese revolutionaries who were active in northern Vietnam during the early years of the First Indochina War can be classified into three groups: those who had been living in Vietnam before the start of the war, who had become revolutionaries in Vietnam and were members of revolutionary organisations created and based in Vietnam, and who did not have direct contact with the CCP, although they might have lived and studied in China; those who had become revolutionaries in China, then moved to Vietnam for personal reasons, and might not have been able to maintain contact with the CCP after moving to Vietnam; and those who were sent to Vietnam by the CCP either as individuals or as groups for their own survival, or to aid the Vietnamese communists, or for both reasons.

Among the revolutionaries discussed in this article, Wu Qimei, head of the Central Bureau of Political Security of Vietnam, was a representative of the first group. So was Yang Shijie, the leader of the Hải Phòng Overseas Chinese New Democracy Union of Vietnam. Both Wu and Yang were born and raised in Vietnam and were members of the ICP. Although both had spent time in China, neither joined the CCP. Zhao Shiyao and Rong Zhaolin — who joined the CCP in China, moved to Vietnam for personal reasons, lost direct contact with the CCP, and then began to work for the Vietnamese revolution — fell into the second group. Like Wu Qimei and Yang Shijie, Rong Zhaolin was born and raised in Vietnam, but he began his career as a revolutionary in China rather than in Vietnam and he joined the CCP long before becoming a member of the ICP. Pang Zi, Yu Mingyan, and most members of the Old First Regiment and the New First Regiment of the Southern Guangdong Anti-Japanese People's Liberation Army, as well as the other CCP military units, who moved to Vietnam from China following agreements between the CCP and ICP, belonged to the third group.

These early Chinese participants of the First Indochina War were forerunners of the Chinese political and military advisers sent to northern Vietnam after 1950, in the sense that these later arrivals simply continued and upgraded the collaboration between the CCP and ICP, which the three groups of early participants had initiated. However, there do exist some important differences between the early participants and those later actors. One difference is that the later arrivals were able to bring Chinese political and military assistance to the Vietnamese revolutionaries to a much higher level, mainly because they came after the founding of the PRC. Economic aid from China was absent before 1950 but became an important

118 Personal communication with Chen Huaquan, 29 Feb. 2020.

119 Wang Keming, 'Geming lieshi haoqi changcun: Mianhuai Gao Ying lieshi'.

dimension of the relationship between the PRC and the DRV after that. The later arrivals also held more powerful positions in the Chinese communist system than the early participants, and were dispatched to Vietnam by the CCP's central leadership rather than by a local branch, and partly because of that, the Vietnamese leaders took them more seriously than they did the early participants. Whereas most early participants were subordinates of the Vietnamese communist leaders, the later actors held more or less equal status with the Vietnamese leaders. A related difference is that the relations between the early participants and the Vietnamese revolutionaries were more reciprocal than those between the later actors and their Vietnamese comrades. Many of the early participants were in Vietnam for their own survival, and they were offered protection and subsistence while working for the Vietnamese revolution. This was not the case for the later group. In fact, before 1950, the Vietnamese communists had assisted the CCP in the Chinese Civil War not only by providing shelter to the Chinese revolutionaries in Vietnam, but also by sending Vietnamese communist troops, medical doctors, weapons, and other materials to southern China to support the CCP troops there.¹²⁰

Possibly due to the division of northern Vietnam into areas controlled by the French and those ruled by the Việt Minh and the difficulty in maintaining communications even between different regions under the control of the Việt Minh, the Vietnamese revolutionaries made no effort to integrate all the Chinese revolutionary organisations into a unified one during the First Indochina War. Another difficulty for unification is that the organisations were created for different purposes and possessed different features. The three organisations presented in this article were very different from one another in their composition and missions. The Overseas Chinese Self-Defence Regiment/Independent Regiment was a military unit, the Central Bureau of Political Security of Vietnam was a quasi-military intelligence unit, which was prevented from having contact with other revolutionary units, and the Hải Phòng Overseas Chinese New Democracy Union of Vietnam was an underground mass organisation. Such differences would have made it difficult to integrate them even if they had all been based in the same place. In 1948, the ICP established the United Revolutionary Association of Central Vietnam and the United Revolutionary Association of Southern Vietnam, with the aim of organising all the Chinese revolutionaries in central and southern Vietnam, respectively,¹²¹ but no effort was made to create a similar united revolutionary association in northern Vietnam.

120 Lu Wen, *Zhandou zai Shiwandashan*, pp. 9, 876–82; Shi Zhihua 施芝华, 'Beijin Chongshan' 北进崇善 [Marching northward toward Chongshan], in *ibid.*, pp. 556–60; Bao Zhou 保洲, 'Kuayue Shiwandashan zhiyuan pengyou' 跨越十万大山支援朋友 [Cross the Shiwan Great Mountains to support friends], in *ibid.*, pp. 628–9; Chen Sheng 陈生, Zeng Bao 曾保, 'Yi he Nanlong zhongtuan bingjian zuozhan' 忆和南龙中团并肩作战 [Recalling the time when we fought side by side with the Nanlong Regiment], in *ibid.*, pp. 630–34; Huang Dong 黄东, 'Zhandou zai Yuenan Zhilengqu jiaotongzhan zhong' 战斗在越南支冷区交通站中 [Working at the transit station in the Zhileng District of Vietnam], in *ibid.*, pp. 929–32; Lan Xi 蓝希, 'Shiwanshanqu zhuyue lianluozhan' 十万山区驻越联络站 [The liaison station of the Shiwan district in Vietnam], in *ibid.*, pp. 933–5; Yan Duanjiao 严端郊, 'Mianhuai Dengdage' 缅怀邓大哥 [In memoriam of Elder Brother Deng], in *ibid.*, pp. 1001–4.

121 Zhuang Yong, 'Shishinianlai zai Yuenan laodongdang lingdaoxia de Yuenan huaqiao'.

The collaboration between the Chinese and Vietnamese revolutionaries during the First Indochina War laid the foundation for the triangular cooperation between the PRC, the DRV, and the Chinese community in northern Vietnam during the two decades from 1954 to the late 1970s. As a reward for their contribution to the defeat of the French, and more importantly, as a friendly gesture to China, the DRV government offered benevolent treatment to the Chinese in northern Vietnam during those two decades. North Vietnamese leaders had invited the CCP to help organise the Chinese in northern Vietnam in the 1940s, and they continued to allow China to maintain a certain degree of control over the Chinese in that region from the 1950s to the late 1970s. In return, both China and the Chinese in northern Vietnam offered substantial support to the DRV government during the long Vietnam War. Enhancing bilateral relations through preferential treatment toward the Chinese in Vietnam became an important strategy adopted by the Vietnamese communist leaders, as demonstrated in their interactions with the Chinese Nationalist government before 1948 and with the PRC after 1949.

This triangular collaboration, which lasted from the late 1940s to the late 1970s, did not go without disagreements and conflicts. The Vietnamese communist leaders perceived that the special relations between the Chinese government and the Chinese in northern Vietnam could be both beneficial and detrimental to Vietnam's national interests, depending mainly on the status of Sino-Vietnamese relations and the attitude of the Chinese in Vietnam toward both countries. The Chinese in northern Vietnam could play different roles in the relationship between Vietnam and China. They could become real internationalist revolutionaries who were fully devoted to the Vietnamese revolution and the Vietnamese nation, or mediators between the Vietnamese and Chinese revolutionaries, but they could also serve as the agents of hostile regimes.

The conflicts between the Chinese and Vietnamese revolutionaries in Hải Ninh in the late 1940s over issues of citizenship, taxation, and freedom of travel portended similar episodes in the subsequent decades. Likewise, the bloody purge of Wu Qimei and his teammates in late 1947 foreshadowed the tragic fate of many other Chinese in Vietnam, whose identity as Chinese could easily become a cause of suspicion and persecution. Such victimisation could happen even when the two parties and governments maintained friendly relations, but the scale of victimisation could greatly escalate when bilateral relations turned sour. The accusations against the commanders of the Independent Regiment, the killing of the Wu Qimei group in 1947, and the imprisonment of Rong Zhaolin in 1970 all happened when the two parties were fighting allies, and once the alliance broke down in the late 1970s, most Chinese in northern Vietnam were expelled. Such conflicts evince that even in a revolution that took internationalism as its guiding principle, national and ethnic boundaries could still exert significant influence. Most Chinese and Vietnamese revolutionaries probably sincerely perceived themselves as internationalists, but they were Chinese and Vietnamese internationalists. Conflicts were thus inevitable, because sometimes Chinese internationalism and Vietnamese internationalism can take different or even opposite directions.